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MARCH 1987
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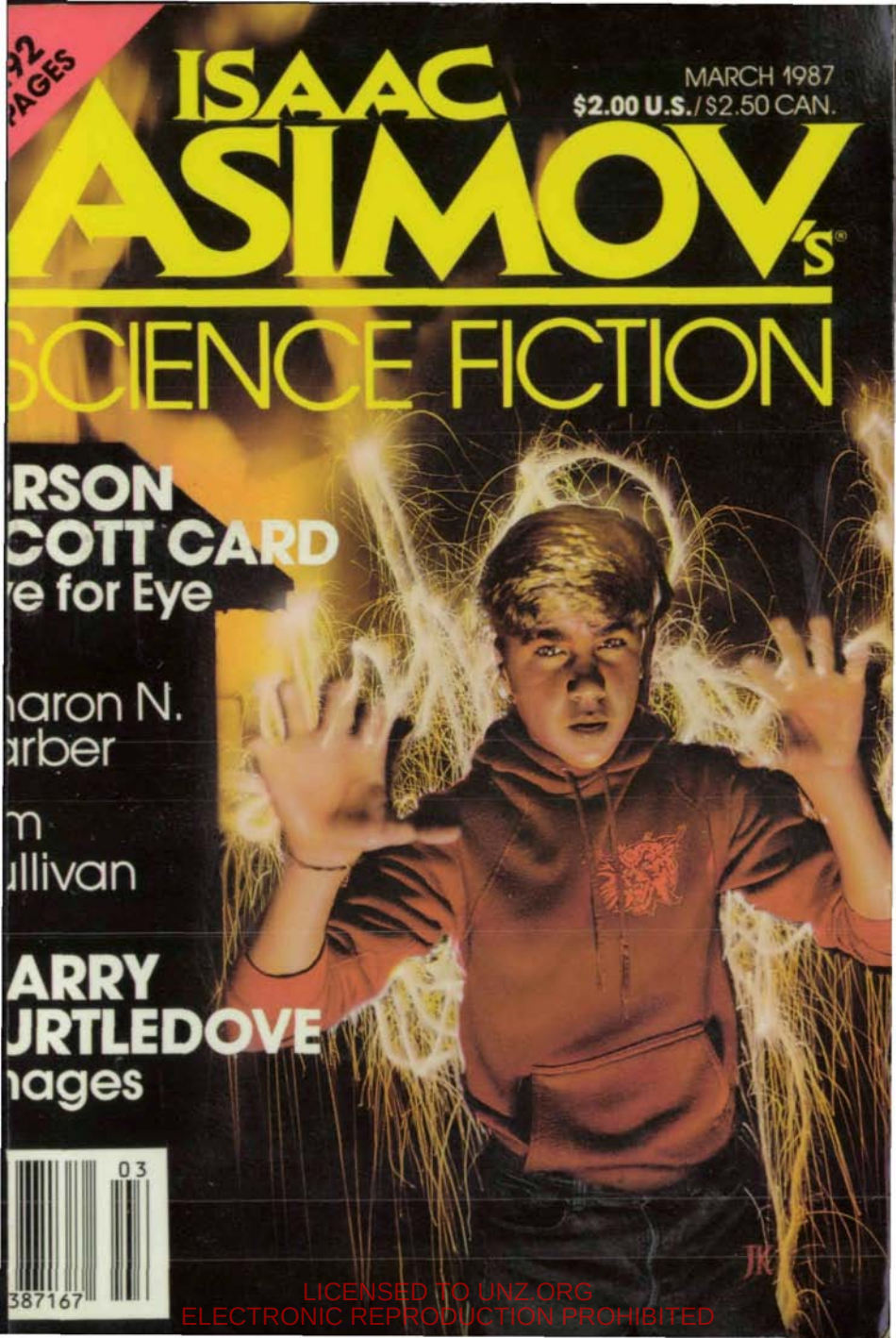

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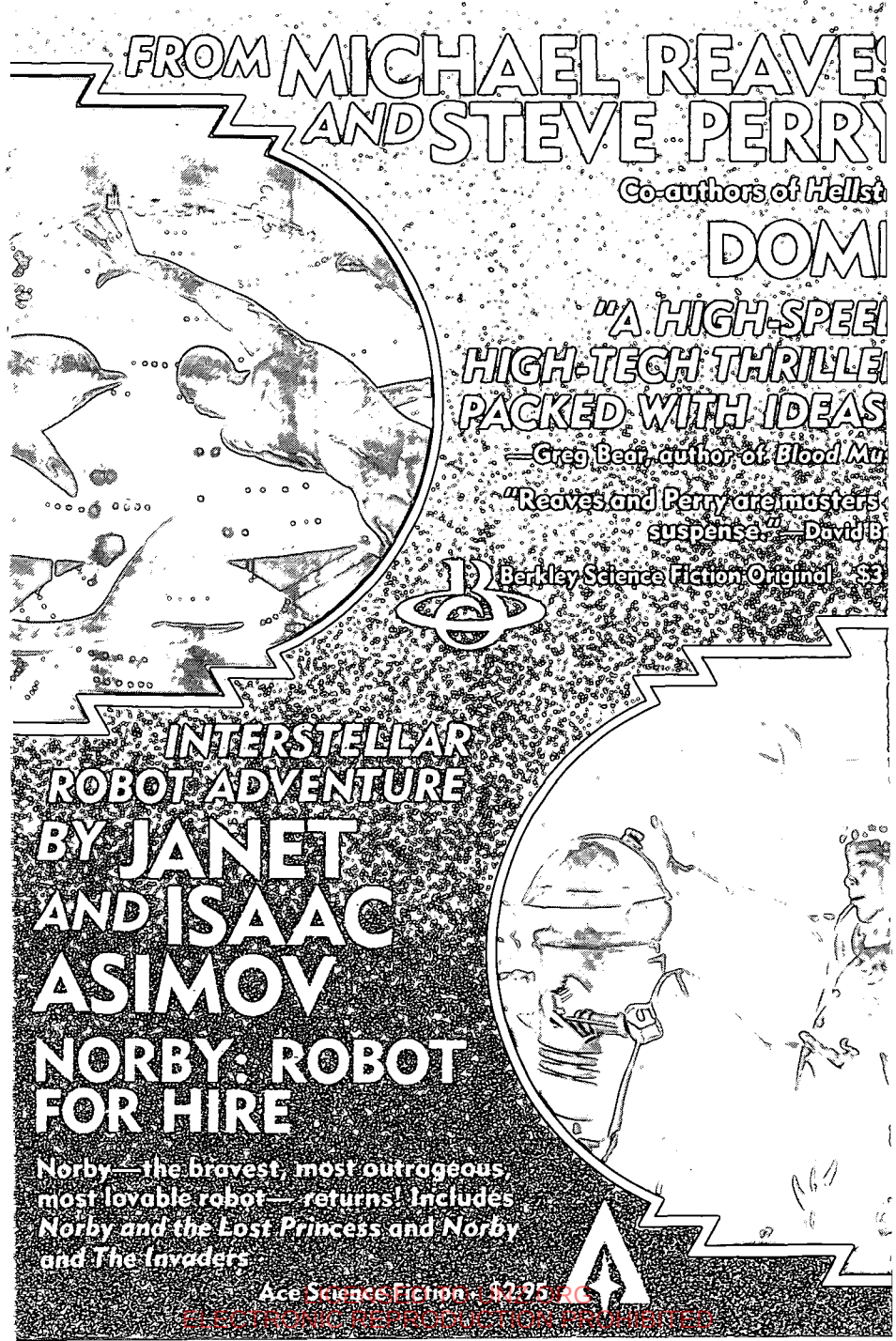

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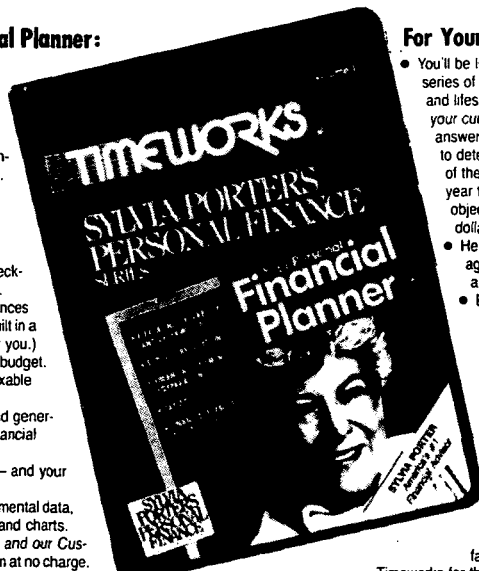

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March 1987
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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

INTIMATIONS OF MORTALITY

On June 11, 1986, Chesley Bonestell died. It cannot be said that he perished in the flower of his youth, for he had attained the patriarchal age of ninety-eight, so that he was thirteen years old when Queen Victoria died.

He was an artist, and he is one of us, even though he never (as far as I know) illustrated any science fiction stories. He did work on science fiction movies, however, including "War of the Worlds," "When Worlds Collide," and "Destination Moon." He was also the foremost astronomical illustrator of his time, and his views of the Solar system were beautiful and of unmistakably science-fictional interest.

At almost the same time, Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentinian fantasy writer, died at the comparatively youthful age of eighty-seven.

The double departure got me started thinking about death—a morbid subject, but one that is inseparable from life, and one that every one of us must, like it or not, face unflinchingly.

My first thought (and a not surprising one given my interest in numbers) was to wonder whether anyone in our fraternity had attained the age of one hundred. I can't think of anyone, and suspect that Bonestell has come closest.

Of course, it is only now that we can think of really aged science fiction personalities. Prior to the 1920s, such personalities were few in number and were often not thought of in connection with science fiction (under whatever name it was known in early days). We tend to think of Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle as science fiction writers, but the general public thinks of the former as a writer of horror tales, and the latter as the creator of Sherlock Holmes. Even H. G. Wells was more famous to most people as a (straight) novelist and as the author of "The Outline of History" than as a writer of the science fiction of his youthful days. Perhaps only Jules Verne was looked at by everyone as a science fiction writer and nothing else and he died in 1905 at the age of seventy-seven.

It was only after magazine science fiction was introduced in 1926

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that a large group of writers came into being who were identified chiefly, or even entirely, with science fiction, and this group has, of course, been increasing in numbers steadily ever since.

For the most part this group was young and some of them are still alive and active today. There is Jack Williamson, whose first science fiction story appeared in the December, 1928, *Amazing Stories* and who is still going strong today at the age of seventy-eight. There is also Clifford D. Simak, whose first science fiction story appeared in the December, 1931, *Wonder Stories*, and who is still actively writing today at the age of eighty-two. They are members of that terribly small group who have been writing science fiction actively for over half a century.

Of the group of oldsters, the one who most nearly belies the expression, in my opinion, is my good friend, L. Sprague de Camp, who at the age of seventy-nine has the bearing, appearance, and mental acuity of someone at least twenty years younger. I am rooting for him to reach the hundred mark and for me to still be alive so that I may witness it. Sprague will soon enter what I may call the "Half-Century Club," for his first story appeared in the September 1937 issue of *Astounding Stories* and, of course, he is still actively writing.

We are not all still alive, however. Murray Leinster, for instance, antedated the science fiction magazines by a few years. His first

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story appeared in *Argosy* in 1919 and he remained active for just about half a century, dying in 1975 at the age of seventy-nine. (At that he was eight years younger than Bonestell.)

Don't let me give you the impression, however, that all science fiction personalities have lived to an advanced age. Some of them died in their comparative, or even actual, youth. John W. Campbell, Jr., whose influence on magazine science fiction was greater than that of anyone else in history, died in 1971 at the age of sixty-one, and Henry Kuttner, who in the 1940s may have been the most popular of all the science fiction writers (a poll of readers listed him first at a time when I finished eleventh) died in 1958 at the age of forty-three.

Stanley G. Weinbaum, whose first story, the classic "A Martian Odyssey" appeared in the July, 1934, *Wonder Stories* enjoyed a meteoric one-and-a-half year career in which he was instantly and universally recognized as the best science fiction writer of his time and then died in 1936 at the age of thirty-six. What shook me most of all, of course, was the occasional death of a prominent science fiction personality who was younger than myself. This happened for the first time, in 1958, when Cyril Kornbluth interrupted a rapidly accelerating career in science fiction by dying of a heart attack at the age of thirty-five. He was three years younger than I.

Naturally, as I grew older, that sort of thing became more common. In recent years, James Blish, Judy-Lynn del Rey, Frank Herbert, Philip K. Dick, and Tom Scortia have all died and have all been younger than I. Clearly, this sort of thing will happen with increasing frequency as I continue to grow older, and I can stop it only by passing out of this worldly realm of pain and strife myself—something I am understandably reluctant to do.

Writers may "die" before they die, of course. Though a science fiction writer may live into old age, he may, while still fairly young, cease to participate actively in the field for a variety of reasons. He may become too busy with other things, he may grow tired of writing (it's hard work, I'm told), he may feel he's used up his fund of creativity, or, most tragically, he may simply be left behind by a developing field.

There were two great "shakeouts" in the history of magazine science fiction. The first came in 1938, when Campbell became editor of *Astounding* and demanded a new kind of science fiction. Those writers, however successful up to then, who could not meet the Campbellian standards simply faded away, either voluntarily or otherwise.

David H. Keller, for instance, was highly thought of and published many stories in the pre-Campbell period. He died in 1966 at the age of eighty-six, but he wrote very little after the Camp-

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bell shakeout. The same was true of Harl Vincent, who died in 1968 at the age of seventy-five, and of Ed Earl Repp, who lived to be about eighty, I think, though I don't have the year of his death.

Sadly enough, to "die" of a shakeout somehow diminishes one's stature. Die young as Weinbaum and Kornbluth did and you are remembered as a giant struck down in an untimely fashion. Fade out because of changing fashion while living on and, somehow, you become a fossil, and anything from a figure of fun to a target for mild contempt. I remember that Horace Gold always used Ed Earl Repp as a symbol for anyone who could no longer cut the ice.

Of course, there are some who survive a shakeout. Their stature usually increases as a result. Writers like Williamson, Simak, and de Camp are particularly admired for their ability to adapt to Campbell's standards and it is no wonder all three received the Grand Master award.

The second shakeout came in the early 1960s with the "New Wave" experiment. The movement was not, in my opinion, a success, but it left a legacy of experimentalism in style. Add to that the growing permissiveness where sex and graphic language was concerned, to say nothing of the weakening of Campbell's hold on the field, and once again a number of successful writers faded out.

The most notable example of this was A. E. van Vogt. His first story, the classic "Black Destroyer," appeared in the July 1939 issue of *Astounding* and, instantly, he was a first magnitude star. He was joined almost at once by Robert A. Heinlein and, in the first years of the Campbell revolution, those two dwarfed everyone else into near-significance. And yet van Vogt did not survive the post-Campbell shakeout. Neither did Raymond F. Jones, as another example, or Eric Frank Russell. Russell died in 1978 at the age of seventy-three, while van Vogt and Jones are still alive. And, of course, their reputations have suffered.

Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, and Fritz Leiber are examples of superstars of the Campbell era who survived the post-Campbell shakeout. All three are still active, though Heinlein is seventy-nine, Leiber is seventy-six, and Clarke is sixty-nine. Naturally, all three are Grand Masters.

I might as well say that I myself have managed to survive the post-Campbell shakeout, though for a while I thought I wouldn't. I'm very glad I did and I intend to continue writing for the rest of my life.

But anyway, we live in new times now. The number of young science fiction writers of great ability is now so enormous that the passing of the dinosaurs of the past need not make one apprehensive. Science fiction, we can be sure, will flourish more than ever in the hands of the young masters who are regularly featured in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. ●

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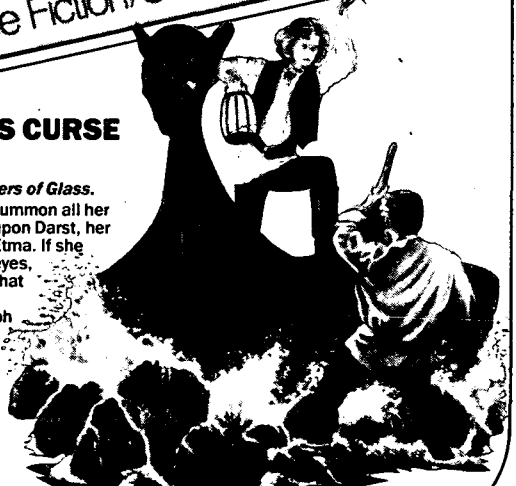

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LETTERS

Dear Dozois:

(Eh? But surely we were at Eton together? No? Well . . . Balliol . . . ? *No?* Pit-ty.)

Dear Gardner:

I doubt if all the grouse seasons since The Old Queen died could have, together, produced more grousing than I have produced, in re the various Illo(e)s for my various stories and/or articles. And justifiably so. Justifiably so.

So it gives me a very great pleasure indeed to say that the illustrations by Hank Jankus for my "Postscript on Prester John" are not only probably the best ones anything by me has ever had, but I doubt if any other writer has had anything better, anywhere, any time, any how. And I wish that you would somehow pass this spontaneous declaration on to Mr. Jankus at your convenience. They not only suggest the spirit of the old woodcuts of the period, but in my opinion are better. By far.

At this point I had better stop, else I risk becoming fulsome.

And my best wishes to the Good Doctor.

Yoursly,

Avram Davidson
Retsil, WA

And my best wishes to Avram, who, like a surprising number of people seems to prefer to live on the pacific coast instead of here on the Coast.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I believe Mr. Silverberg confused Gaius Julius Caesar with Publius Clodius Pulcher in his tale "Gilgamesh in the Outback." I'm not sure how he managed to do this. It's true that both were rakish politicians of the popular party, but the lines

> "At least I am no slippery tricky serpent like you, Caesar, who dons a wig and spies on women at their mysteries if it pleases him."

can only be a reference to the sacrilege committed against Bona Dea by Clodius Pulcher in 62 BC in order to commit adultery with Caesar's wife Pompeia who presided over the rites that year. I am not clear as to why Mr. Silverberg mistook Pompeia's lover for Pompeia's husband. Caesar never did. While proclaiming his belief in the innocence of Clodius (a political ally who also employed armed gangs against his opponents), he divorced his wife on the grounds that "Caesar's wife must be above suspicion." Since Caesar himself was decidedly below suspicion in mat-

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ters of adultery, this has to rank as one of the high points in the history of chutzpah (defined as that quality enshrined in a man who kills his parents and asks for mercy on the grounds he's an orphan).

I won't bother you with further details on the incident or Clodius Pulcher (a man whom even the young Caesar might justly have looked down upon). I am sure you can supply anyone who wants them with materials from your research library, probably of your own writing. I would, however like to register some opinions on Mr. Silverberg's portrayal of Caesar. Given a chance, Caesar probably would use firearms; all the Romans had a practical turn. The assumption that he was not interested in the kingship is questionable, however. Plutarch and Dio Cassius expressly say he was, and the stories told of him seem to show a man desirous of honors even greater than what the senate had already granted, which were extreme. The statement that Caesar "wanted the power without the emblem," applies more to his successor Augustus, who was never offered the kingship, wore no insignia of rank, and established the imperial system of government. Also I would hesitate to call the dead Caesar a fop. Though not inaccurate at one time in his life, it but ill describes a man who spent nine years slogging in the wilderness of Gaul, and once faced down, single-handedly, a mutiny of veterans. This may however be Gilgamesh speaking and not Mr. Silverberg.

Daniel A. Krasner
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It took me years to get over Talbot Mundy's portrayal of Caesar as villain, and Shakespeare's portrayal of him as a pompous bore. It took Shaw's "Caesar and Cleopatra" to cure me. I'm entirely on your side with respect to Clodius Pulcher (the reincarnation of all that was unsavory in Alcibiades and nothing that was noble). Bob Silverberg slipped there, I'm afraid.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Gentlemen:

I have been a subscriber to your magazine on and off since 1979, and I have enjoyed seeing the changes that arrive with each new editor. Although Mr. Scithers is the one editor I associate the most with *IAsfm*, I do not doubt that Mr. Dozois will only improve the magazine.

The day that I receive the latest copy of *IAsfm* is usually the high point of my month, and I end up reading the majority of it within two days. Then I re-read it. Again. And again. At school, my friends were never suprised to find me reading "that sci-fi stuff again."

Stories I have encountered within the pages of *IAsfm* are among my favorite SF stories, and I thank you for printing them. They give a person who hopes to spend her life as a bookkeeper a chance to be something else for too short a time.

A year ago, I sent in a letter which you printed, and I also thank you for doing that, even though when I saw it, I almost had a heart attack. I was the last person I expected to see in the Letters area, but it led to a lasting correspondence with a fellow subscriber who lives in MA. The friendship that has developed between us has helped me through some very hard times in my life, and he's given me the confidence I've needed to pursue my daydreams. If it weren't for your magazine, we never would have known about each other, and my life would have been so much more messed up than it should have been. Thank you very much for playing a part in this.

Sincerely,

Anne MacFadyen
Niantic, CT

My goodness, I knew the letter column served a purpose but it didn't occur to me that it might serve as a medium for creating friendships of this sort—but, of course, in hindsight, I see this is not at all unlikely. You will be pleased to know, Ms. MacFadyen, that there is no charge for this service. The opportunity to do good is, in itself, ample reward.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Dozois—

Without doubt, Connie Willis' "Chance" was the singularly most *depressing* story I've seen in nearly nine years of *IAsfm*. I wonder how many other people resonated along its darkened strains.

But it's also very interesting to see the variety Ms. Willis is capable of, from "Blued Moon" with its similar collegiate backdrop, to this. What comes next? I'll have to admit that I prefer the light to darkness, no matter how well-done the darkness may be.

I. Semya Postrovin
Mine Hill, NJ

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Most of us do prefer light to darkness, of course, but it is the task of the writer to portray life in the curiously prismatic lens of his imagination and life includes darkness. As a matter of fact, in my glummer moments, I am forced to admit that there is far more darkness than light in most lives.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Doctor,

I am enjoying, as usual, the latest (July) issue of the magazine. There is one thing in your editorial, though, which should be the subject of an entire new editorial.

In the paragraph on writing *clearly*, you intimate that an "intelligent youngster" may turn into an *un*intelligent adult when life has the chance to "dull the youngster's wits."

How does that "dulling" occur? Is it possible that passing through our present educational system, or just through life is indeed a stupefying experience? I really would love to hear more on this. I have an idea that television has a lot to do with it, at least on an older elementary to adult level.

Incidentally, on the original theme of the article, I think that the novels by Poul Anderson may be some very good examples of "transitional" reading. I like those which are obviously written for a younger audience as well as the "adult" books. For one thing, humor can be good *and* simple. I'll admit that some of it is a bit too simple, and elicits groans more than guffaws, but then I'm married to a punster who has managed to hand down the talent(?) to his

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highly verbal son. I now have two grandchildren and am afraid that my groaning may become terminal. Does keeping absolute silence help? In reality, I'm not good at punning and am probably a little jealous. (I'm quite proud of myself when I can come up with a good one once-in-a-while, adult or not.) Let's face it, I love the language! It is such fun to read it, use it, and listen to it when it is done with knowledge and love.

I sign off with a toast to good communication with the English language.

Linda A. Kropff
1212 Priscilla Drive
San Jose, CA 95129

Of course I think that modern education has deleterious effects on youngsters. It is education of children in the mass by means of a state-wide curriculum, and children are individuals. If clothing was manufactured for youngsters in a single size, there would be very few it would fit completely and youngsters would hate to wear clothing. The analogy is, I think, clear.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editor,

I am more interested in the truth than in science fiction, and methinks Dr. Asimov is the real author of Judith Tarr's "Pièce de Résistance."

By the Great God of Truth, whom all should serve, will Dr. Asimov affirm otherwise?

Inquisitively,

Lelah L. Clemons
Ada, OK

PS: But, of course, there are undoubtedly some (sometimes many) grains of truth in science fiction. "Sweet Mystery of Life" indeed.

I have written a very few things under pseudonyms in my younger years, but even those things have since re-appeared under my own name. I assure you that anything that appears anywhere nowadays under any name other than Isaac Asimov was not *written by Isaac Asimov. My name is my brand and I stamp it on everything I do.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Boy did you hit the mark! Your July editorial was so accurate, I'm almost amazed. What you said about kids and books seems to be a minority view, but it's the right one. So many people think that books not written directly for children are incomprehensible to them, or that, in a book, if a word bigger than six letters is used, the book will be immediately trashed for lack of understanding. Kids learn so much from one well written "adult book," that it really is a shame how many people think they should stick to Mother Goose. At my local library kids are discouraged from using the "Adult Section" until they're over twelve, so they're confined to thirty-page books like "How to Make a Handpuppet"—which can be very educational, but not exactly the book you want to curl up with at night for some serious and entertaining reading.

Also, contrary to popular belief, if a kid is going to read a book, it

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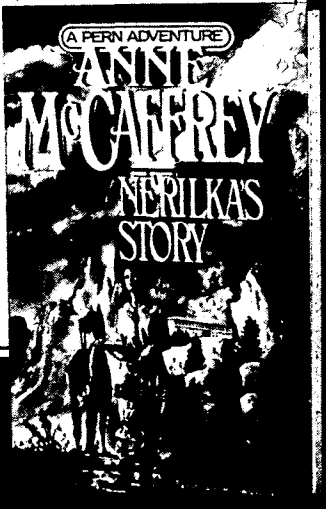

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doesn't have to have as much violence as all of Sylvester Stallone's movies put together to keep the attention of a child; as long as it's interesting, well written, and doesn't trudge along at a sloth's pace, most kids could read a book that's aimed at adults.

The most unfortunate thing, though, are parents who will not buy or let their kids get "books that are too advanced for them." Or even answer questions kids might have about something they've read. Maybe you should rewrite your "George and Azazel" stories "for kids," and force all adults who censor "complicated" books from children to read them.

By the way, the first Asimov book I ever read was about volcanos or something. (It's hard to remember what you read when you were six.) Thanks for the editorial, I hope at least some adults got some rude awakenings.
Sincerely,

Stefan Lynch, Age 14
San Rafael, CA

I'm glad you agree with me, Mr. Lynch. I wouldn't of course care to say that there are no dull youngsters, though the percentage of dull youngsters is not as great as the percentage of dull adults, in my opinion. However, if we confine ourselves to youngsters who are fond of science fiction, I think they embody the highest average IQ of any group on Earth of whatever age.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Dozois:

An amazing (lowercase) coincidence occurred this week. Having just finished dragging my eyes through *The Name of the Rose*, an historical novel which includes a passing mention of Prester John, I nearly went to my reference library to read more of the Prester John legend. I was more in need of a "fix" of good, fascinating fiction, however, so I picked up your July 1986 issue. Lo and behold, there I stumbled into both Avram Davidson's "Postscript on Prester John" and Robert Silverberg's "Gilgamesh in the Outback." After that, of course, the reference library beckoned quite insistently.

"Gilgamesh" is an excellent yarn, reminiscent of the Niven-Pournelle *Inferno*. I do object, however, to Mr. Silverberg's leaving a "gun on the wall." He raises, several times, the question of why apparently saintly people are found in Hell, even hinting at the existence of an answer when Hemingway says, "You were honest writers or you'd never have gone to Hell." We never get a real answer to the problem, though. Is this story just the first part of a novel or collection, with the question to be resolved later? I hope so, because I truly enjoyed Mr. Silverberg's educated name-dropping.

Although "Postscript" was also delightful, it has one serious error. On page 58, Mr. Davidson says the Mar Shimon moved to San José, California, and implies that his subsequent murder took place there. On the next page, however, he said the shooting was "in a suburb of San Francisco." Which is true? If the latter, then which suburb was it? As printed, an unknowing reader might think that Mr. Davidson considers San José to be such a sub-

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urb, but I understand that he lives in the Bay Area, so he must surely know better.

Both are cities of about 750,000 people, although I think San José has a few more. Downtown San Francisco lies about fifty miles northwest of downtown San José, similar to the distance between Baltimore and Washington. In contrast, the hearts of Dallas and Ft. Worth are something like thirty miles apart, but I don't think either of them would relish being called a suburb of the other. The centers of Minneapolis and St. Paul are less than ten miles apart, and their borders touch, but neither is a suburb.

Yours,

Ed Rush
Cupertino, CA

My own feeling is that it is perfectly permissible to leave some questions open in a story. It stimulates thought; it stimulates discussion; it raises doubts and permits alternatives. I'm sure you have read Frank Stockton's "The Lady or the Tiger?" It's the fact that the question is left open that makes the story immortal. As to suburbs, my own feeling is (as is well known) that the planet Earth is a suburb of Manhattan.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Dozois, or Dr. Asimov, or whoever reads these,

This is the first time I've written you, but upon finishing the June issue, I felt strangely compelled, as if . . . as if . . . some . . . strangely compelling creature grabbed hold of my mind, and tugged, and TUGGED . . . (well, actually it wasn't like that at all . . .).

Anyway, it was the first time in two years of reading your magazine that I sat down and read it all the way through, and I liked five of the eight stories. Like the saying goes, "You can't please all of the people . . ." but you know the rest.

The stories I didn't like all that much (I didn't hate them, mind you; I just wasn't that thrilled by them is all) were those by Messrs. Bishop and Sterling, and the Tems. The main problem I had with the first two was that I felt they were ultimately cold, inaccessible, and unaffecting. I can see how some readers might enjoy these two stories more than I did because of certain Ideas presented in them, but it takes more than Ideas to win me over. Of the Tems' story, I felt it had a generally amateurish tone to it (as I'm sure this letter does), and maybe I'm stupid, but I'm not totally sure what the authors were "getting at." In retrospect, maybe I should wait a couple of months, read the three stories again, and perhaps they will affect me in a different way . . .

Of the remaining five, the three short pieces were like a breath of fresh air; I liked the impression I got that the authors weren't taking their work very seriously. And the last two stories were extremely enjoyable and readable. The only fault I found with Mr. Aikin's story was that some of Steven's emotions seemed false; otherwise it was a very fine piece, whether or not it is science fiction. (Oh, should I capitalize that?!?)

Mr. Kelly's story, on the Other Hand, was very much SF and by

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far the best piece of the month. I love his future that he writes about, and I hope he does so again soon; while it is a hard-edged, high-tech universe, it allows for exciting, thought-provoking and deeply human stories such as "The Prisoner of Chillon" and "Solstice."

Before I close . . . would you print the nominees of the Hugo and Nebula Awards as they are made available, seeing as you already print the winters? And would you keep up the great work?

Anthony Rapp
516 E. 81 St. #8
New York, NY 10028

The salutation raises a question which I might as well answer. Chestertonian Gardner, sweet Sheila, and I all *read the letters. I'm the one who selects the letters for publication and answers them, but Gardner and Sheila may also answer when that is appropriate.*

—Isaac Asimov

Also, regarding your second question, our lead time is so long that the publication of the names of the nominees for the science fiction achievement awards would be of little use to our readers. Those nominees, however, are always announced in the SF trade magazines well before awards are bestowed on the winners.

—Sheila Williams

Dear Editors:

As you may know, Uranus' period of revolution is about seven times as long as Jupiter's period of revolution; Neptune's period of revolution is about fourteen times as long as Jupiter's, and Pluto's is about twenty-one times as long as Jupiter's. Also, Jupiter's period of revolution is about forty-nine times as long as Mercury's period of revolution.

Jupiter's period of revolution isn't far from being a multiple-of-seven times Mars', Earth's, and Venus's period of revolution either.

Also, Mars' period of revolution is close to being two times seven cubed Earth days long. And in two days light travels a distance that is equal to about seven cubed times the length of the semi-major axis of the Earth's orbit.

Do you think that all of the above is mere coincidence?

Robert Levi Schuman
Winthrop, IA

Except for Neptune, the planetary distances follow a simple mathematical relationship called "Bode's Law." Since periods of revolution are related to distance by Kepler's Third Law, all your figures follow inexorably. There's nothing mysterious about it. As for Bode's Law—that is thought to be mere coincidence, or Neptune would not be an exception.

—Isaac Asimov

EDITORS' NOTE:

We are pleased to announce that Andrew Joron's "Shipwrecked on Destiny Five" (May 1985) won the 1986 Rhysling Award for long speculative poetry.

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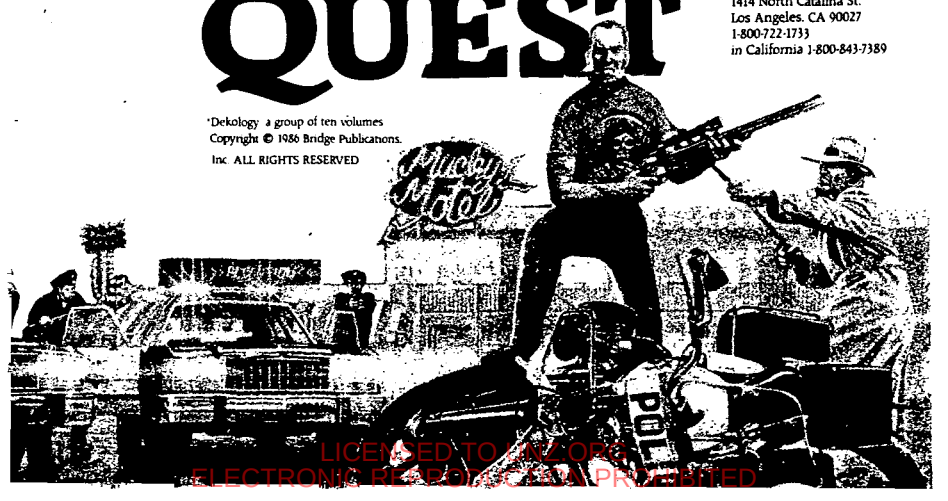

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GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

Recently I wrote an interactive novel set in the lustrous world of Robert Silverberg's Majipoor. And the second most difficult part (the first being, of course, doing service to Silverberg's tremendous creation and beautiful prose) was dealing with the suddenly expanded vocabulary.

There were Ghayrogs, Vroons, Skandārs, thokkas wine, birdnet vine, dholes, and so on, all of them made vibrantly real in the Majipoor books. But they were not so easy to instantly pick up and use. Of course, I eventually added to the flora and fauna with a few modest creations of my own, such as papangos and arakas, and discovered that the process of word invention is quite a bit of fun.

Which brings us, almost, to *Balderdash*. For years now, game companies have attempted to make up definition games based on an old parlor classic, Dictionary. In Dictionary, players fabricate meanings to bizarre (yet real) words. Points are given to the players that can pick the real meaning from the false.

It's a simple idea, but it's led to some remarkably dull board games. After all, there seems to be no need for an actual game.

So, when *Balderdash* (TSR Inc., P.O. Box 756, Lake Geneva, WI 53147–0756; $19.95) appeared on my doorstep (described on the box-top as "the hilarious bluffing game"), I was more than mildly skeptical. (I mean, I can't remember ever playing any game I'd describe as "hilarious.")

And when I saw the premise, old as the hills, I thought that the game was an instant write-off. Ho-hum.

There was, though, the fact that the game came to TSR via Canada, a surprising fertile terrain for games in recent years.

And so, with a group of friends, I played *Balderdash*.

And we laughed ourselves absolutely silly, eyes watering and doubled over until it hurt.

The rules are very simple. There's a small board (with a loop of spaces featuring a cow, a can of red paint, and shoes—arcane symbols I don't understand) and a stack of 500 cards featuring 2,500 *Balderdash* words; all of them real and nearly every one as strange-sounding as any tentacled creature on Robert

(continued on page 183)

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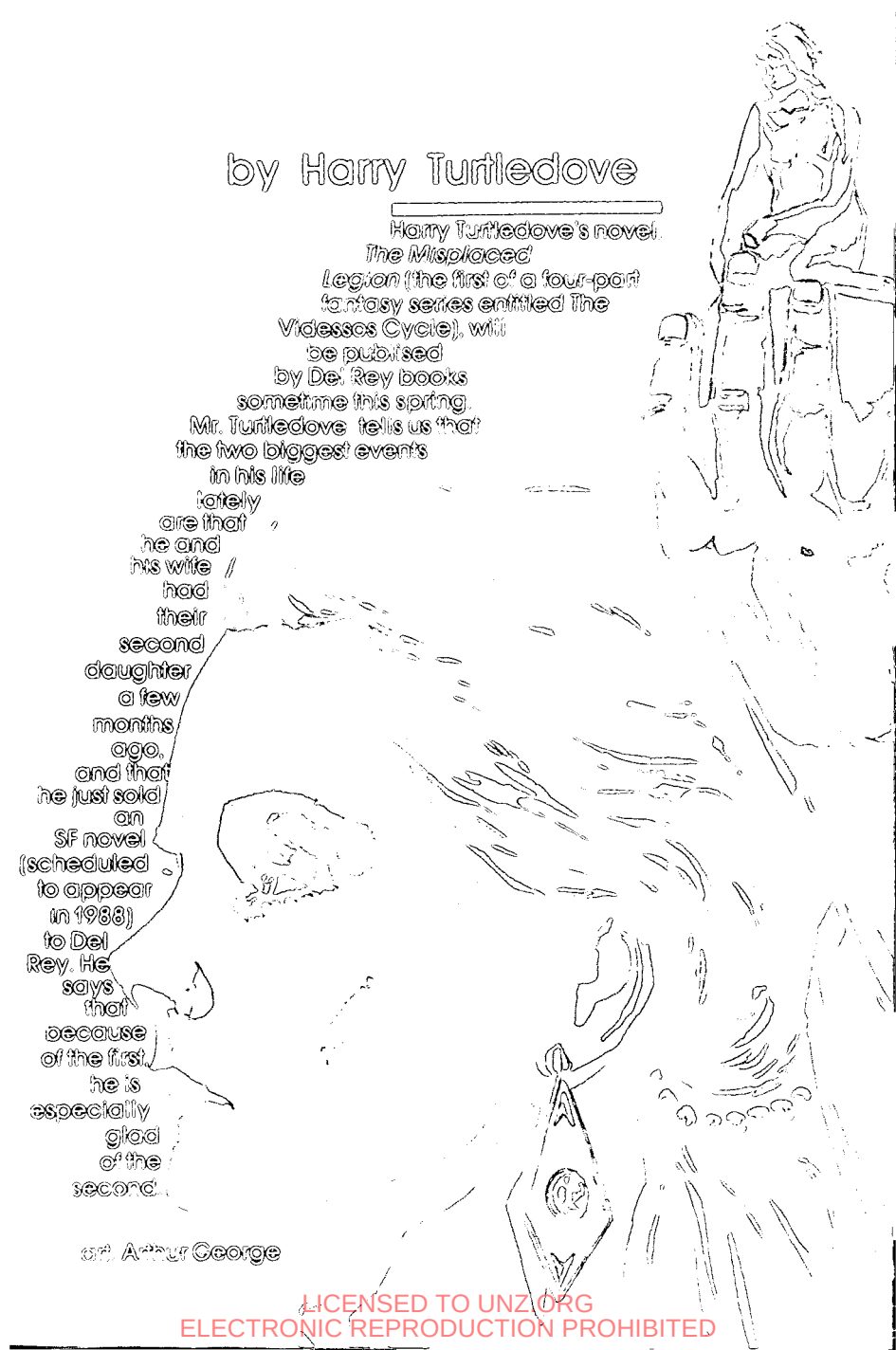
by Harry Turtledove

Harry Turtledove's novel *The Misplaced Legion* (the first of a four-part fantasy series entitled The Videssos Cycle), will be published by Del Rey books sometime this spring. Mr. Turtledove tells us that the two biggest events in his life lately are that he and his wife had their second daughter a few months ago, and that he just sold an SF novel (scheduled to appear in 1988) to Del Rey. He says that because of the first, he is especially glad of the second.

— Arthur George



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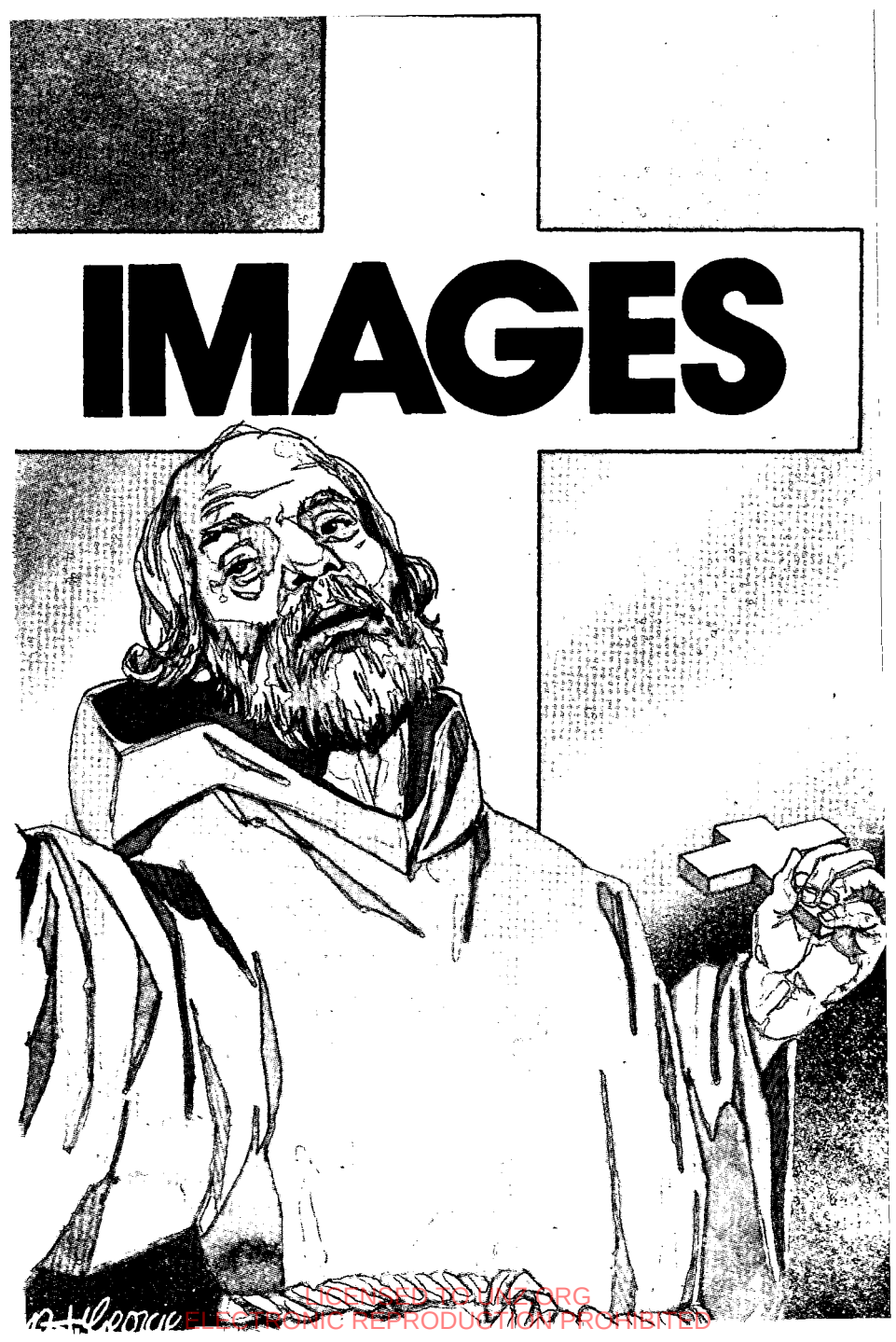

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Had he not decided to pray at the church of St. Mouamet, Basil Argyros would never have got caught in the riot.

The church was in a poor part of Constantinople, not far from the Theodosian harbor on the Sea of Marmara. It only held about twenty people. As a magistrianos, one of the Roman Emperor's secret agents, Argyros could have chosen a more splendid holy place. He had prayed in Hagia Sophia often enough.

But over the years he had grown fond of St. Mouamet. For one thing, as an imperial agent he traveled widely, and Mouamet was the patron saint of changes, no doubt because he had gone through so many in his own life. Born a pagan Arab, seven centuries ago he had converted to Christianity on a trading journey to Syria. After Paul, he was probably the most zealous convert the church had. He became a noted hymnographer, and ended his days as archbishop of New Carthage in distant Ispania, not far from the Pillars of Hercules.

He had a fine church there, much grander than the little shrine dedicated to him here in the capital. Argyros had seen it a couple of years ago, on a mission to the far west. Come to think of it, he had also prayed to St. Mouamet before he set out for Syria last year to see what mischief the Persians were stirring up in the border fortress of Daras. He wondered idly if this visit to Mouamet's church portended another voyage.

He picked his way through the winding alleys of the harbor district toward the Mese: Middle Street, Constantinople's main thoroughfare. Once or twice toughs eyed him speculatively, but decided it was wiser to leave him alone. He might wear a gold ring on one finger, but he also slung a smallsword on his belt. Moreover, he was a tall, solidly built man, still strong though close to forty. His features were as forbidding, too stern to be quite handsome; he had melancholy brown eyes under a single black bar of eyebrow.

Unlike the back alleys, the Mese was paved with blocks of stone; Argyros scraped mud from his sandals. Colonnades on either side of the street supported roofs that gave shelter from sun and rain. When it had been showery the night before, as was true now, they also dripped. Argyros walked in the middle of the street, dodging mules, small carts, and heavily laden porters.

The Mese widened out into the Forum of Arkadios. The other squares in the city (all over the Empire, Constantinople was *the* city) were named for great Emperors: Augustus, Constantine, Theodosios. Theodosios' halfwit son, Argyros thought, hardly belonged in such exalted company. His plaza was a good match for the Forum of the Ox, though.

A crowd had gathered at the base of the tall column in the center of the square. Once a statue of Arkadios had topped the pillar, but an earthquake had sent it crashing down about a hundred years after Moua-

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met's time. Only a colossal hand and forearm survived, set up next to the column. Standing balanced on two man-sized fingertips, a monk was haranguing the crowd.

The fellow was scrawny, swarthy, and not very clean. He wore a ragged black robe and let his hair grow long, so that it fell in a tangled mat past his shoulders. A fanatical light burned in his eyes as he shouted out his message, whatever it was.

His Greek, Argyros noticed as he approached, had a strong Egyptian accent. That sent the first trickle of alarm through the magistrianos. Egyptians were volatile, and still reckoned themselves a folk apart despite having been part of the Roman Empire since before the Incarnation. As if to emphasize their separateness, many still clung to the monophysite heresy; even those nominally orthodox had strange notions about the relationship between Christ's human and divine natures.

The monk came to his peroration just as Argyros reached the back edge of the crowd. "And so," he cried, "you can see how these icons are a desecration and an abomination, a snare of Satan to deceive us into circumscribing the uncircumscribable." He drew an image of Christ from within his robe, held it over his head so his audience could see what it was, then dashed it with all his strength against the column beside him.

Cheers rang out; so did shouts of "Blasphemy!" Someone flung a large melon at the monk. He ducked, only to be caught in the side of the head by a stone. He toppled to the ground. The stone-thrower's triumphant bellow turned to a howl of pain and fury when someone punched him in the face.

Crying, "Down with the icons!" several young men dashed for the first church they could find, hot to match action to word. An old woman hit one of them over the head with her basket of figs, then kicked him as he sprawled on the cobbles.

The Egyptian monk was on his feet again, laying about him with a stick. Argyros heard it thud into someone's ribs. Then his interest in the broil abruptly went from professional to personal. Without bothering to find out which side he was on, a fat man ran up and kicked him in the shin.

His yelp was reflexive. So was his counterpunch. The fat man reeled away, a hand clapped to his bleeding nose. But he had friends. One of them seized Argyros' arms from behind. Another hit him in the stomach. Before they could do him worse damage, a ferret-faced man neatly bludgeoned the rioter who had hit the magistrianos. He fell with a groan.

Argyros stomped on the foot of the man behind him. As his sandals had hobnails, the fellow shrieked and let go. By the time the magistrianos whirled round, his smallsword drawn, the rioter was retreating at a limping run.

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"Thanks," Argyros said to the chap who was so handy with a cudgel.

That worthy was on his knees next to the man he had felled, busily rifling his beltpouch. He looked up for a moment, grinning. "Don't mention it. Down with the icons!"

Like most educated Constantinopolitans, Argyros fancied himself a theologian, but it had never occurred to him to wonder if religious images were wrong. They were simply there: the iconostasis in front of the altar, the mosaics and paintings on the walls and ceilings of churches. At the moment, however, he lacked the leisure to meditate on their propriety.

As riots have a way of doing, this one was rapidly outgrowing the incident that had spawned it. Already several merchants' stalls had been overturned and looted, and another went over with a crash as Argyros watched. A woman ran past him with her arms full of cheap seashell jewelry. A man struggled to drag away a chair, and was set upon and robbed in his turn before he had got it thirty feet. The magistrianos sniffed fearfully for smoke; a maniac with a torch or the burning oil from a broken lamp could set half the city ablaze.

Through the shouts and screams that filled the square, through the sound of splintering boards, Argyros heard a deep, rhythmic tramping coming down the Mese from the east, getting closer fast. Nor was he the only one. "The excubitors!" The warning cry came from three throats at once.

A company of the imperial bodyguards burst into the square. A barrage of rocks, vegetables, and crockery greeted them. They ducked behind their brightly painted shields, each of which was inscribed with the labarum: ☧, Christ's monogram. One excubitor went down. The rest surged forward, swinging long hardwood clubs.

The rioters stood no chance against the excubitores' grimly disciplined efficiency. Here and there a man, or even two and three together, would stand and fight. They got broken heads for their trouble. The excubitores rolled across the Forum of Arkadios like a wave traveling up a beach.

Argyros fled with most of the rest of the people in the square. Approaching an excubitor and explaining that he too was an imperial official struck him as an exercise in futility—and a good way to get hurt.

As it happened, he got hurt anyway. The alley down which he and several other people ran proved blocked by a mulecart that did not have room to turn around. A squad of excubitores came pounding after. The magistrianos' cry of protest and fear was drowned by everyone else's, and by the triumphant shouts of the guardsmen. He felt a burst of pain. His vision flared white, then plunged into darkness.

It was nearly sunset when he groaned and rolled over. His fingers went to the knot of anguish at the back of his head. They came away sticky

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with blood. He groaned again, managed to sit up, and, on the second try, staggered to his feet.

As he shakily walked back toward the Forum of Arkadios, he discovered someone had stolen his smallsword and slit his purse. Maybe, he thought, pleased with his deductive powers, it was the same ruffian who had sapped the man in the plaza and then robbed him. And maybe it wasn't. Trying to decide which made his headache worse, which he had not imagined possible.

The Forum of Arkadios, usually crowded, was empty now except for a couple of dozen excubitores. "On your way, you," one of them growled at Argyros. He did his best to hurry.

There were excubitores on the Mese down toward the Forum of the Ox, and more in that square. Constantinople was buttoned up tight, trying to keep trouble from breaking free again. Another soldier approached the magistrianos. "Move along, fellow. Where are you supposed to be?"

"Mother of God!" Argyros exclaimed. "I'm supposed to dine with the Master of Offices tonight!" The engagement had been beaten out of his memory.

Seeing his bedraggled state, the excubitor set hands on hips and laughed. "Sure you are, pal, and I'm playing dice with the Emperor tomorrow." The Master of Offices was one of the most powerful men in Constantinople, one of the few entitled to report directly to the Emperor. Among other duties, he headed the corps of magistrianoi.

That, to Argyros, took precedence over everything else. Waving vaguely to the trooper, he hurried down the Mese toward George Lakhanoodrakon's residence. The Master of Offices lived in a fashionable quarter in the eastern part of the city, not far from the great church of Hagia Sophia and the imperial palaces.

The magistrianos hurried through the Forum of Theodosios and that of Constantine, with its tall porphyry column and its water-clock. He passed the Praetorion, the government building in which he worked when he was in Constantinople. Darkness was falling as he lurched into the Augusteion, the main square of the city, which was flanked by Hagia Sophia, the palace district, and the hippodrome. Dinner was set for sunset. He was going to be late.

George Lakhanodrakon's doorman, a Syrian named Zacharias, knew Argyros well. He exclaimed in polite horror as the magistrianos came up. "By the Thrice-Holy One, sir! What happened?"

"Why? What's wrong?" Argyros said indignantly. "I know I'm not quite on time, and I'm sorry, but—"

The doorman was gaping at him. "On time? Sir, your face, your clothes—"

"Huh?" His wits muddled by the blow he had taken, the magistrianos

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had been so intent on getting to Lakhanodrakon's house, he had not even thought about his appearance. Now he looked down at himself. His tunic was torn, filthy, and bloodstained. A swipe of his hand across his face brought away more dirt and dried blood.

"Sir, you'd better come with me." Calling for other servants to help him, Zacharias took Argyros' arm and half led, half carried him through the doorway. Like the houses of most wealthy men, Lakhanodrakon's was built in a square pattern around a court, with blank, marble-faced walls fronting the street. On a fine, mild evening like this one, the dinner party would be held in the court, amid the fountains and trees.

Argyros did not get that far. Lakhanodrakon's servants took him to a guestroom and laid him on a couch. One ran for a physician while others washed his face and the ugly wound on the back of his head. They fetched him wine, stripped him of his tunic, and dressed him in one belonging to the Master of Offices.

He was beginning to feel human, in a sorrowful way, when Lakhanodrakon himself hurried into the room, concern on his strong, fleshy features. "St. Andrew preserve us!" he burst out, swearing by Constantinople's patron. "Don't tell me the ruffians waylaid you this afternoon, Basil!"

"Well, actually, no, your illustriousness," Argyros said ruefully. "As a matter of fact, it was an excubitor." He added, "I think he hit me with Arkadios' column." Despite the wine, his head was still splitting.

"You stay here until the doctor has had a look at you," Lakhanodrakon commanded. "Then if you'd sooner go home, I'll have Zacharias send for a linkbearer for you. Or if you're well enough to join us outside, of course we'll be delighted to have you."

"Thank you, sir; you're very kind."

The physician arrived a few minutes later; anyone summoned to the Master of Offices' residence hurried. The man shaved the back of Argyros' scalp, applied an ointment that smelled of pitch and stung ferociously, and bandaged his head with a long strip of linen. Then he held a lamp to the magistrianos' face, peered into each of his eyes in turn.

"I don't believe there is a concussion," he said at last. "Your pupils are both the same size." He gave Argyros a small jar. "This will reduce the pain; it has poppy juice in it. Drink half now, the rest in the morning." Businesslike to the end, he waved aside Argyros' thanks and departed as quickly as he had come.

The magistrianos would have recognized the odd, mouth-filling flavor of the poppy without the doctor's explanation; poppy juice was a common medicinal ingredient. Though he still felt slow and stupid, he went out to the courtyard. Having come this far, he was not about to miss the dinner party, no matter what Lakhanodrakon said.

The Master of Offices' other guests, naturally, swarmed round him and

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made much of him, when he would rather have taken his quiet place on a couch and drunk more wine. Not everyone knew what had touched off the riot. There was a thoughtful silence after Argyros told them. Then the imperial grandees began arguing the propriety of images among themselves. Aside from the hippodrome, theology was Constantinople's favorite sport.

Normally, the magistrianos would have played a vigorous part in the debate. Now, though, he was content merely to seize the opportunity to recline. Servants offered him fried squid, tuna cooked with leeks, roast kid in a sauce of fermented fish. He turned everything down. The smell of food made him queasy.

He slapped at a mosquito; the torches and lanterns that made Lakhanodrakon's courtyard bright as day drew swarms of them. He wondered why the Master of Offices had so many lights set out. Half the number, he thought, would have been plenty.

Then a servant passed among the guests, handing each one a papyrus folio. Argyros caught Lakhanodrakon's eye. "You didn't tell me you would be reading your poetry tonight," he called.

"I was not sure I would finish the fourth book of my *Italiad* in time for this evening," the Master of Offices said. "I'm distributing book three here, to bring everyone up to date in the story. Thanks to you," he went on, bowing politely, "the company is already familiar with books one and two."

From Daras, Argyros had brought back the secret of the interchangeable clay archetypes the Persians were using to produce incendiary pamphlets in appalling numbers. The Master of Offices had favored keeping the archetypes as deeply guarded a mystery as Greek fire, but the magistrianos changed his mind by printing a large number of copies of the epic poem Lakhanodrakon had been working on for years. Now it seemed his superior was taking the lesson to heart.

Along with his fellow guests, the magistrianos skimmed through the folio. Lakhanodrakon had tried lines on him and he had even contributed a suggestion or two himself, so he knew the poem fairly well. It was modeled after George of Pisidia's poems on Herakleios' wars against the Persians in the time of St. Mouamet, and told of how Herakleios' grandson Constans II had reconquered Italia from the Langobards. Lakhanodrakon wrote in the same uncompromisingly classical iambic trimeters the earlier George had used seven centuries before.

"Now that you've been refreshed as to the background, my friends, I shall commence," the Master of Offices declared. To read, he held his manuscript at arm's length; he was a dozen or so years older than Argyros, and growing farsighted.

Some of the verses were quite good, and Lakhanodrakon read well. He

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had a faint Armenian accent, which suited the martial tale he was telling. The magistrianos wished he could pay closer attention. The poppy juice and the lingering effects of the blow combined to make him feel detached, almost floating above his couch. . . .

A polite patter of applause woke him. He guiltily joined in, hoping no one had seen him doze off. The dinner party began to break up. When he went over to the Master of Offices to say his goodbyes, Lakhanodrakon would not listen to them. "You spend the night here, Basil. You're in no shape to go home alone."

"Thank you, sir," the magistrianos said, though he wished Lakhanodrakon had not been so insistent. It only made him certain his boss had noticed him asleep.

Argyros' secretary unceremoniously dumped a handful of rolled-up papyri on his desk. "Thank you, Anthimos," the magistrianos said.

Anthimos grunted. He was tall, thin, and stooped, and always reminded Argyros of a mournful stork. Capable but without enthusiasm or real talent, he would never be anything more than a secretary, and knew it. When he returned to his own work, Argyros forgot about him the moment his back was turned.

The magistrianos read rapidly over the interrogation reports taken from the men and women the excubitores had captured during the riot. They showed him little he had not learned from his own brief encounter. The rabble-rousing monk's name, he found out, was Sasopis, which confirmed the fellow's Egyptian origin. Accounts of just what he had preached varied, depending on how each witness felt about icons.

Sasopis himself had escaped. As would any Constantinopolitan official, Argyros thought that a shame. Even since the Nika uprising eight hundred years ago, in the time of the first Justinian, their specter haunted the city. Anyone who thought to bring back such chaos deserved whatever he got.

For the next couple of weeks, the city stayed calm. The magistrianos accepted that with gratitude but no great trust, as he might have welcomed one of the last fine days before the autumn storms began. He used the respite to try to track down Sasopis, but to no avail. The miserable monk might have vanished off the face of the earth, though that, Argyros thought sourly, was too much to hope for.

When the trouble broke out again, Sasopis had nothing to do with it. Yet still it sprang from Egypt: as the plague had in Justinian's day, strife came now via grainship from Alexandria. Sailors went off to wench and drink and roister, and took with them the exciting tales of the turmoil they had left behind. Up and down the Nile, it seemed, men were at each other's throats over the question of the icons.

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Argyros could imagine what happened next, in some dockside tavern or brothel lounge. Someone would have said scornfully, "What foolishness! My grandfather venerated images, and that's enough for me." And someone else would have answered, "Because your grandfather burns in hell, do you want to join him?" That would have been plenty to bring out the knives.

The second round of rioting was not confined to the Forum of Arkadios, and took the excubitores, the scholae, and the other palace regiments four days to put down. Several churches had their icons defaced with whitewash or scraped from the walls, while one was put to the torch. Luckily, it stood alone in a little park, and the fire did not spread.

The day after peace—more a peace of exhaustion than anything else—returned to the city, word came of disorders in Antioch, the third city of the Empire.

George Lakhanodrakon summoned Argyros that afternoon. The magistrianos was shocked to see how worn he looked; although Master of Offices was not a military post, Lakhanodrakon was a member of the Emperor's Consistory, and had had to attend privy council meetings day and night. He also oversaw the civil servants who prepared orders and recorded testimony, all of whom had been overworked in the emergency.

"You should rest, sir," Argyros said.

"So I should," Lakhanodrakon agreed. "I should also exercise until I lose this belly of mine, should learn better Latin to go with my Greek, and should do a great many other things I have no time for."

No doubt one of the things he had no time for was well-meaning but useless suggestions. The magistrianos flushed, expecting a dressing-down.

But his superior surprised him, asking, out of the blue it seemed, "Basil, where do you stand on this fight over the images?"

"For them, I suppose," Argyros said after a moment's hesitation. "I'm no Jew, to say an icon is a graven image. And since it was a breaker of images (is 'iconoclast' a word?) who started the troubles here, I can't look kindly on their cause—all the more so because I had my head split in the brawl."

"I happen to agree with you," Lakhanodrakon said. "I respect the tradition of the church, and icons have been a part of it for many, many years. Still, you'll find honest men who think we're wrong. In Consistory the other day, the Count of the excubitores called icons a pagan holdover, and said that was reason enough to suppress them."

"It must have made quelling the riot interesting, if you couldn't decide which faction to put down," Argyros said dryly.

The Master of Offices rolled his eyes. "Joke all you like, but it's nothing to laugh at. Both sides can't be right: either it's proper to give reverence

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to icons, or it's not. The Emperor and the patriarch have to lay down the proper doctrine for the people to follow. We can't have icons destroyed here and hallowed there. One Empire, one faith."

"Of course," Argyros nodded. "Since there can only be one true creed, everyone should follow it." In theory, as Lakhanodrakon had said, the whole Empire worshiped as Constantinople decreed. In fact, heresy persisted in Egypt, in Syria, in the western provinces reconquered from their German kings—Italia, Ispania, Africa, Narbonese Gallia. It was only fitting to root it out wherever it sprang up.

"You have a good knowledge of the inner learning, Basil," Lakhanodrakon said. "If you were going to justify the use of images in worship, how would you go about it?"

The magistrianos considered. As George Lakhanodrakon had said, he knew his theology; only in the barbarous lands of northwest Europe was such wisdom reserved for priests. He said, "Of course the argument that an icon is a graven images falls to the ground as soon as it is made. The Pauline dispensation frees us from the rigor of the Jewish law. I would say the chief value of images is to remind us of the holy ones they represent—Christ, the Virgin, or a saint. When we look at an icon, we contemplate the figure behind the portrait. Also, icons teach the truths of the faith to those who cannot read Scripture."

The Master of Offices had been jotting down notes. "That last is a good point; I don't recall it coming up in any of the council meetings I've attended. I'll pass it on to the patriarch. Have no fear, I'll mention whose suggestion it was."

"You're very kind, your illustriousness," Argyros said, and meant it. Most imperial officials would have appropriated both the idea and the credit that went with it. Then the import of what Lakhanodrakon had said hit him. "The patriarch is collecting arguments in favor of icons?"

"Sharp as usual, aren't you?" The Master of Offices was smiling. "Yes, so he is, to be ready in case of need. One of the options raised for putting an end to this quarrel over images is for the Emperor to convene an ecumenical council."

Argyros whistled, soft and low. "They're taking it as seriously as that, then?" Ecumenical councils were watersheds in the history of the church; in the thousand years since Constantine the Great, only nine had been called. Groups that refused to accept their decrees passed into heresy: notably the Nestorians of Syria, with their undue emphasis on Christ's humanity; and the monophysites, strong in Egypt and all through the Roman East, when the council of Chalcedon would not accept the way they overstressed His divinity.

"I think the Emperor was going to wait and see if things blew over," Lakhanodrakon said, "until last night. That was when the grand lo-

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gothete called the city prefect a filthy pagan-minded heretic and broke a crystal decanter over his head."

"Oh, my," the magistrianos said, blinking.

"Yes. Officially, of course, the prefect fell down a flight of stairs, and don't forget it—the saints have mercy on you if you go around telling the other tale. But it was about then that Nikephoros decided a council might not be out of place."

"When will the order summoning the bishops go out?" Argyros asked.

"Soon, I think. It's late July now—or has August started yet? In any case, fall will be starting by the time prelates in places like Carthage and Rome and Ispania receive the call. By then it will be too late for them to travel—no ships will be sailing till spring. I imagine the synod will be held then."

"Good. We'll have some time to prepare a solid theological case."

"Among other preparations," the Master of Offices said with a grin. Ecumenical councils were as much exercises in practical politics as they were religious disputes. Most of the time, they ran as the Emperors who called them wanted them to. Nikephoros III was a thorough ruler; he would have no intention of letting this one go wrong.

Lakhanodrakon went on, "Write me a statement giving your views on the icons; let me have it some time in the next couple of weeks. I'll convey it to the patriarch, as I said. Don't expect any immediate acknowledgment, though—it won't be the only document he's getting, I'm sure."

"I daresay." Everyone in the city who fancied himself a theologian—which meant, for all practical purposes, everyone in the city who could write—would be sending impassioned missives to the patriarchal residence attached to Hagia Sophia. Most of them, as was the way of such things, would end up in braziers or have their ink scraped off so they could be reused.

Lakhanodrakon made a gesture of dismissal, saying, "I'll look forward to seeing that commentary of yours." Argyros bowed his way out, then hotfotted it over to the library in Hagia Sophia; best to start taking notes before half the tomes he needed disappeared.

The magistrianos submitted his long memorandum on the icons to George Lakhanodrakon. He was proud of the document, which he had thickly studded with quotations from such venerable authorities as St. John Chrysostomos, St. Ambrose of Milan, St. Sophronios of Jerusalem, St. Athanasios of Alexandria, and the church historian Eusebios, who had been at the very first ecumenical council, the one Constantine convened at Nikaia.

While he worked and afterwards, reports of strife over the images kept coming into Constantinople. A riot convulsed Ephesos, with half the town

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burnt. Several monasteries were sacked outside of Tarsos when the monks refused to yield up their icons. The Jewish quarter of Neaplis in Italia was plundered because the Neapolitans blamed the Jews, who rejected images for their own reasons, for stirring up iconoclasm in the first place.

It was almost a relief when the stormy season set in and news grew harder to acquire. One of the last grain ships from Alexandria brought word that Arsakios, the patriarch of that city, had convened a local synod there, to try to settle the issue for his ecclesiastical province. No one on the big merchantman knew how the synod had come out; it had still been going on when they sailed.

Argyros wondered how much the gathering could accomplish. The patriarchate of Alexandria leaned over backwards to avoid antagonizing the monophysites, who were probably a majority in Egypt, and the monophysites had always opposed images. As their name implied, they felt Christ had but one nature, the divine, after the Incarnation, with His humanity entirely subsumed. And since God by definition was uncircumscribable, the monophysites rejected all attempts to portray Christ.

Come to think of it, the magistrianos remembered, that was the line the Egyptian monk Sasopis had taken. Despite Argyros' best efforts, the devil seemed to have vanished into thin air. Probably, the magistrianos thought gloomily, he was halfway across the Empire by now, spreading trouble as he wandered from town to town.

As winter wore on, Argyros forgot about Sasopis. The Master of Offices shared responsibility with the patriarch for lodging the bishops during the upcoming council, for one of his duties was seeing to embassies that came to Constantinople. George Lakhanodrakon passed the job on to Argyros, who went through the city checking on available cells in monasteries and on grander quarters for the more important or more luxury-minded prelates.

"After all this running about, the council itself will be a relief," he told the Master of Offices one cold February day.

"That's as it should be," Lakhanodrakon replied calmly. "Let the country bumpkins from Sicily or Rome see the proper way to do things. If everything is planned well in advance, it will go properly when the crucial moment comes and there's no more time for planning."

"You're not the one getting blisters," Argyros muttered, too low for his boss to hear. But that was unfair, and he knew it. Lakhanodrakon was doing enough work for two men, each half his age.

The first bishops began arriving in mid-April, a bit earlier than the Master of Offices had expected. Thanks to his elaborate preparations, though, they were housed without difficulty.

There were representatives from all five patriarchates: that of Con-

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stantinople, of course, and Antioch, and Jerusalem, Rome, and Alexandria. The Alexandrian contingent, led by Arsakios himself, was the last sizable one to reach the imperial capital. The Egyptians virtually took over the monastery of Stoudios, in the southwestern part of the city. They behaved as if it were a citadel under siege, not a place of worship and contemplation. Muscular monks armed with very stout walking-sticks constantly patrolled the grounds, glowering at passersby.

"Egyptians!" Lakhanodrakon snorted when that was reported to him. "They always act as though they think it would pollute them to have anything to do with anyone else."

"Yes, sir," Argyros said, but inside he wondered. He had watched Arsakios disembarking from his ship. The patriarch of Alexandria had been friendly enough then, distributing blessings and coppers among the longshoremen and other dock laborers at the Theodosian harbor. The grin on his foxily handsome face, in fact, had been enough to rouse the magistrianos' ever-ready suspicions.

But diligent checking had turned up nothing more incriminating than the fact that Arsakios had brought a woman with him. If only the priests who held to their vows of celibacy were allowed to take part in the ecumenical council, Argyros thought, Nikephoros could hold it in St. Mouamet's little church, not Hagia Sophia. Nevertheless, he filed the information away. No telling when a hint of scandal might come in handy.

The Emperor and his courtiers gathered in the Augusteion to greet the assembled prelates before they went into the great church and called the council to order. Argyros stood in the first rank of the magistrianoi, behind George Lakhanodrakon, whose position of honor was at the left hand of Nikephoros III's seat.

Nikephoros III, Autocrat and Emperor of the Romans, rose from his portable throne and bowed to the hundreds of clerics in the square. They in their turn performed the proskynesis before him, going down to their knees and then their bellies as they prostrated themselves. Sunlight flashed from cloth-of-gold and pearls, shimmered off watered silks, was drunk by plain black wool.

After the bishops, priests, and monks had acknowledged the Emperor's sovereignty as vicegerent of God on earth, most of Nikephoros' courtiers went back to their duties. Several magistrianoi, however, Argyros among them, accompanied Lakhanodrakon as he followed Nikephoros into Hagia Sophia. The churchmen came after them.

The atrium of the great church was magnificent enough, with its forest of marble columns, their acanthus capitals bound with gilded brass. Then the clerics passed through the exonarthex into the nave, and Argyros heard gasps. He smiled to himself. Throughout the Empire, churches

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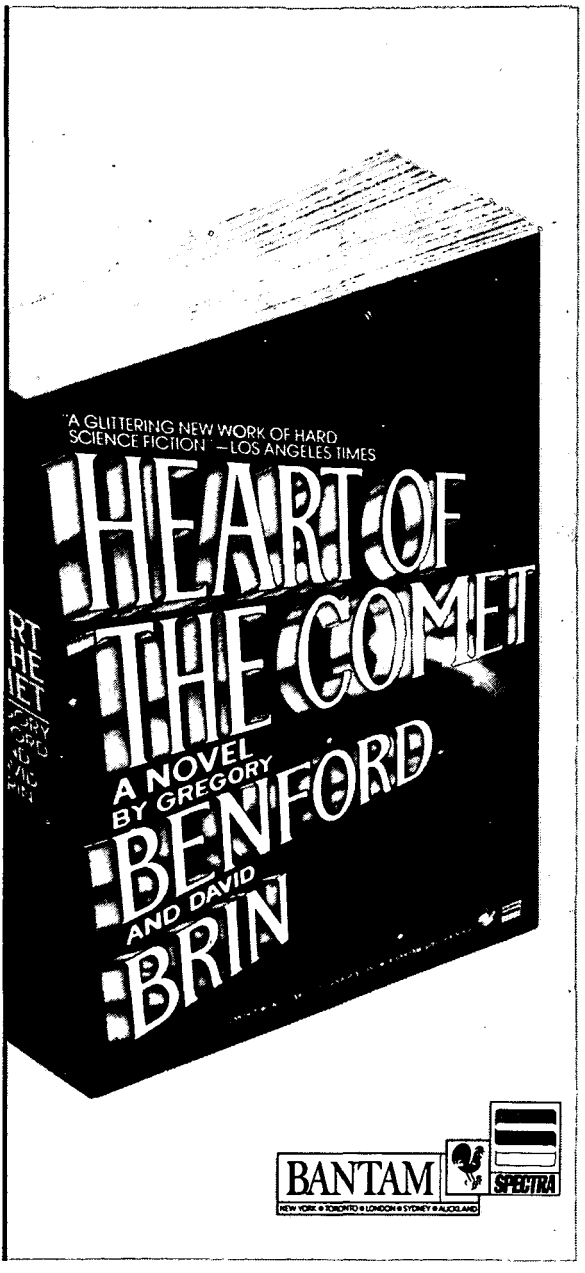
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were modeled after Hagia Sophia. The models and their prototype, however, were not identical.

For one thing, Hagia Sophia was huge. Counting the side aisles, the open space under the dome was about eighty yards square; that dome itself reached sixty yards above the floor. With forty-two windows all around the base admitting bright beams of light, the golden mosaic and cross in the dome seemed to float above the rest of the church, as if, as Prokopios had written, it was suspended on a chain from the sky.

Justinian had lavished the wealth of the entire Empire on the church. Rare marble and other stone faced the columns and walls: white-veined black from the Bosporos, two shades of green from Hellas, porphyry out of Egypt, yellow marble from Libya, red and white marble from Isauria, multicolored stone from Phrygia. All the lamps were silver.

Before the altar, itself of solid gold, stood the iconostasis with its images of Christ, the Virgin, and the Apostles. Another portrait of Christ ornamented the crimson altar curtain; He was flanked by Paul and Mary. It hurt Argyros to think of destroying such beauty, but he heard some of the bishops hiss when they saw the icons and other divine images.

The Emperor ascended to the pulpit. His courtiers stayed inconspicuously in one of the side aisles, while the churchmen gathered in the central worship area.

Nikephoros III waited for silence. He was the one man recognizable to everyone in the Empire, for his features appeared on every coin, gold, silver, or copper. He was between Argyros and Lakhanodrakon in age and, like the Master of Offices, had the heavy features and strong nose associated with Armenian blood.

"Dissension, friends, is the worst enemy our holy church knows," Nikephoros declared. His words echoed in the church; he was a soldier-Emperor, used to pitching his voice to carry on the field. He went on, "When this controversy over images came to our notice, we ached in our soul; it is unbecoming for religious men to be in discord, as you are properly men of peace. Thus we have summoned you together for this council. Examine the reasons behind your turmoil, and with the help of the Holy Spirit seek an end to it, and to the evil designs of Satan, who through envy creates the disturbances among you. Hear now the words of Constantinople's holy patriarch Eutropios, who shall convey to you the thoughts that have occurred to us concerning the propriety of icons."

Eutropios began his statement, which Nikephoros and his officials intended as the point of departure for the council. Argyros was pleased to hear two or three phrases from his own little treatise in the patriarch's oration.

The clerics gave Eutropios varying amounts of attention. Many of those from the lands close to Constantinople—from the Balkans or western

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Asia Minor—were already familiar with his arguments. The western bishops, those under the jurisdiction of the bishop of Rome, could be expected to follow along. Ever since Constans II had installed his own candidate on the Roman patriarchal throne to replace the pope who fled over the Alps to the Franks, Rome remained subservient to Constantinople.

The clerics about whom Argyros worried came from the three eastern patriarchates. Even aside from the heretical tendencies in their sees, the prelates of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem still looked on Constantinople as an upstart town a thousand years after its founding.

The magistrianos stiffened. "Look there," he hissed to George Lakhanodrakon, pointing into the delegation of Arsakios of Alexandria. "That's Sasopis! The skinny fellow there, next to the bishop in the green robe."

"Do the best you can to keep an eye on him," the Master of Offices said. "It wouldn't do to drag him out of the opening session of the council in chains."

"No," Argyros admitted reluctantly. "But what's he doing with Arsakios? Alexandria's already had its synod on icons." He stopped. "What did that synod decide?"

"I don't recall hearing," Lakhanodrakon said. He ran his hands over his bald pate, adding in a worried tone, "We're about to find out, I think."

Indeed, Eutropios was running down: "Just as Christ's two natures are linked by a single will, may everyone be joined in concord at the close of our discussions here."

The amen resounded through the great church. Before its echoes had died away, Arsakios stepped forward, his hand upraised. "May I add a few words to your brilliant discussion of the issues, your holiness?"

"Er, yes, go ahead," Eutropios said nervously. Like everyone else, he knew the patriarch of Alexandria was a better theologian than he. Emperors tended to pick the prelates with whom they worked most closely for pliability rather than brains.

"Thank you." Arsakios bowed with exquisite politeness. Despite a vanishing trace of Egyptian accent in his Greek, his smooth tenor was an instrument he played masterfully. "Your address covered many of the points I wished to make, thus enabling me to achieve the virtue of brevity." Stifled cheers rose here and there; Arsakios ignored them.

He went on, "I am not quite certain, for example, your holiness, of your conception of the relationship between this present dispute over images and previous disagreements over how Christ's humanity and divinity coexist."

"I do not see that there is a relationship," Eutropios said cautiously. Argyros frowned; he did not see it either.

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But Arsakios raised an eyebrow in feigned disbelief. "But is not an icon of our Lord a statement of christology in and of itself?"

"The man's mad," Lakhanodrakon whispered to Argyros at the same time Eutropios demanded, "In what way?" of Arsakios.

And the patriarch of Alexandria, smiling, sank the barb: "Let me state it in the form of questions: What does an image of Christ portray? If it depicts His human nature alone, is this not separating His humanity from His divinity, as the heretic Nestorians do? But if it portrays His divinity, does it not both attempt to circumscribe what may not be circumscribed, and to subordinate His humanity altogether, in a monophysite fashion? In either case, then, the validity of the use of images comes into question, does it not? So, at least, decided the synod held in my city this past fall." With another elegant bow, he gave the floor back to his brother of Constantinople.

Eutropios gaped at him in dismay. Nikephoros III scowled from his high seat, but he could do little, autocrat though he was. The Egyptian's attack on the icons had been perfectly respectful, and raised an important question Eutropios' opening statement had left untouched.

The prelates from the three eastern patriarchates also realized that. They crowded round Arsakios, showering him with congratulations. Eutropios was no great theologian, but he did have some political sense. "I declare this first session of the council adjourned!" he cried.

His own supporters left quickly and quietly. The Emperor stalked off toward the private passageway that led back to the palaces. No sooner had he disappeared than the clerics still crowding the floor of Hagia Sophia raised an exultant shout: "We've won! We've won!"

"Arrogant devils, aren't they?" Lakhanodrakon said indignantly.

"Hmm?" A glimpse of motion behind the screen of the second-story women's gallery had distracted Argyros. For a moment he saw a pair of dark, avid eyes peering down through the filigreework at the churchmen below. He wondered to whom they belonged. The Emperor's wife and mistress were both blue-eyed blondes; Nikephoros had a weakness for fair women. In any case, neither Martina nor Zoe was devout. The magistrianos scratched his head. He had the nagging feeling that barely seen face was familiar.

Shrugging, he gave it up and accompanied the Master of Offices out of the great church. The Augusteion was crowded with people wondering how the first day of the council had gone. Some of Arsakios' monks harangued the Constantinopolitans: "Anathema to the worship of lifeless wood and paint! Destruction to idolatry!"

When an iconophile took violent exception to the anathemas hurled at him, a monk ducked under his wild swing and hit him in the pit of

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the stomach with his staff. The evasion and counter showed soldierly skill. Truly Arsakios had come ready for anything.

"His imperial majesty is not going to be pleased at the prospect of a council out of control," the Master of Offices said.

"No," Argyros agreed, "but what if the Alexandrians are right?" His head was still spinning from the subtlety of their argument: to justify the use of images now, somehow the Emperor's theologians would have to steer between the Scylla of monophysitism and the Charybdis of the Nestorian heresy.

Lakhanodrakon looked at him reproachfully. "Not you, too?"

"The Holy Spirit will guide the assembled fathers to the truth," the magistrianos said confidently. Being a veteran of years of bureaucratic infighting, he added, "Of course, we may have to help things along a bit."

The summons to return to Hagia Sophia, or rather to the residence of the patriarch, which was attached to it, woke Argyros in the middle of the night. "What is it?" he asked, yawning in the face of the messenger.

"A gathering of scholars seeking to refute Arsakios," the man replied. He was one of Lakhanodrakon's servants. "I am to tell you that your earlier exposition was clever enough to make Eutropios hope you can help find a way out of our present difficulty."

Eutropios was an amiable nonentity who barely knew Argyros existed. Like the fellow standing in front of the magistrianos, the order came from the Master of Offices. That made it no less flattering. Rubbing his eyes once more, Argyros dressed quickly and followed the messenger, who had a linkbearer waiting outside.

"Careful here," the magistrianos warned, steering them around a pothole in the street in front of the house of his neighbor Theognostos, who was a senior member of the bakers' guild.

"That should be filled in," Lakhanodrakon's servant said. "I almost fell into it a few minutes ago."

On the way to the great church, they passed the hostel where the archbishop of Thessalonike was staying. The archbishop supported the use of icons. A couple of dozen of Arsakios' monks stood in the street, ringing cowbells and chanting, "Bugger the images! Bugger the images!" A few more, their throats tired from such work, sat round a bonfire, passing a jar of wine from one to the next.

"They'll make no friends that way," Lakhanodrakon's man observed.

"No, but they may wear down their foes," Argyros said.

The monks' chant broke off as someone hurled a chamberpot at them from a second-story window. The ones befouled shouted curses that made their previous vulgar chant sound genteel by comparison.

"Go on ahead," Argyros told him companions. "I'll catch you up soon."

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They stared at him as if he were a madman, but went after a little argument, the linkbearer gladly, the servant with misgivings. He yielded only when Argyros pulled rank.

Whistling, the magistrianos strode up to the men by the bonfire and said cheerily, "Down with the icons! How about a swallow of wine for a thirsty man?"

One of the monks rose, none too steadily, and handed him the jug. "Down with the filthy icons it is," he said. Showing decayed teeth, he opened his mouth in a tremendous yawn.

"Wearing work, going to the council of the day and harassing the damned iconodule in there by night," Argyros said.

The monk yawned again. "Ah, well, we're just little fellows out here. Arsakios and his bishops are sleeping sound, but we're caterwauling for all the head picture-lovers tonight, and we'll serenade 'em again tomorrow, and the next day, and as long as it takes to bring home the truth."

"A clever man, Arsakios, to come up with such a scheme," the magistrianos said.

"Here, give me a slug of that," the monk said. His throat worked. He wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his black robe, then chuckled. "Aye, Arsakios'll sleep sound tonight, with that doxy of his to warm his bedding."

"Doxy?" Argyros prodded.

The monk made curving motions with his hands. "Can't fault his holiness' taste, that's certain. If you're going to sin, it may as well be sweet, says I. I don't think she's an Egyptian wench, from her accent, though he's had her since last summer, the lucky dog."

That was mildly interesting. "What's her name?" the magistrianos asked.

"I forget," the monk said. "She's no interest in the likes of me, I can tell you that, not that she doesn't have Arsakios wrapped around her finger." *Finger* was not quite what he said. Pausing to hiccup, he went on, "She's no fool herself, though; I give her that. In fact, someone told me this night's vigil was her plan."

"You don't say." A formidable female indeed, Argyros thought. He rose from his squat, stretched, and said, "I must be off. Keep this stinking image-worshiper wide-eyed till dawn, and thanks for the wine."

"Always happy to help an honest, pious man." The monk smacked himself in the forehead with the heel of his hand. More to himself than to Argyros, he exclaimed, "Mirrane, that's what the hussy calls herself."

It took all the magistrianos' training to hold his face and walk steady. Mirrane had come unpleasantly close to killing him when he was in Daras; despite her sex, she was a top agent of Persia. And from earlier

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encounters in the Mesopotamian city, Argyros could well understand how she had gained Arsakios' favor.

Argyros' fists clenched as he hurried toward Hagia Sophia. The Persians loved to stir up religious dissension in the Roman Empire: if the Romans battled among themselves, it could only profit their rival. And Mirrane had been playing that very game in Daras, rousing the local heretics against the orthodox faith.

Now, though, she was embarking on a far more dangerous course. This quarrel over images threatened to tear all the eastern provinces away, and to set faction against faction through the rest of the Empire.

The magistrianos cursed. Exposing the furor over iconoclasm as a Persian plot would not help. Arsakios, whether inspired by Satan or more likely by Mirrane, had raised a real, thorny theological point, and no doubt had more in his arsenal. The only way to bring back religious peace would be to show he was in error. That made the conclave in the patriarchal residence all the more vital.

There were no shouting monks in the square of the Augusteion. Their din had disturbed not only the patriarch but also the Emperor, and the imperial guards had driven them off. Things inside the patriarch's apartments were quite hectic enough without them. The distinguished theologians and scholars there were going at one another like a kettle of crabs.

"You idiot!" an archbishop with a long white beard shouted at an abbot. "St. Basil clearly states that—"

"Don't tell me, show me!" the abbot interrupted. "I wouldn't take your word the sun was shining without looking outside. Show me the text!"

"Someone's filched the codex!" the archbishop howled in frustration. The abbot laughed and snapped his fingers in the other man's face. Just then, someone pulled someone else's hair, and abbot and archbishop alike rushed to separate the two combatants, both of whom were close to seventy. Eutropios, who was supposed to be presiding over the gathering, looked as though he wanted to hide.

Argyros unobtrusively made his way to an empty chair and spent the next several minutes listening, as if he were trying to pick up gossip at a waterfront tavern. As sometimes unfortunately happens with brilliant men, the meeting had got sidetracked. Here someone was declaring that the writings of the church fathers obviously sanctioned images, there sombody else announced that images were not consubstantial with their prototypes. It was all fascinating, and probably true, and none of it, sadly, the least bit relevant.

Intellectually the magistrianos did not belong in such company, and knew it. But he did have a feel for what was important. To the man next to him, he said, "God became man in the person of Jesus Christ."

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"Amen," the man said. He wore the pearl-ornamented robes of an archbishop. "And God made the world in seven days. What of it?" The nightlong wrangling had left him cranky.

The magistrianos felt himself flush. He was groping after a concept, and could not pin it down. Maybe talk would help, even if it did make the archbishop take him for a simpleton. He went on, "In the Incarnation, the Word—the divine Logos—took flesh."

"And the immaterial became material," the archbishop echoed. "There, you see, whoever you are, I can spout platitudes too."

Argyros refused to let himself be baited. Without meaning to, the archbishop had helped him clarify his thoughts. He said, "Before the Incarnation, God was only immaterial; it would have been blasphemous to try to depict Him. That, no doubt, is why the Old Testament forbade graven images."

"Yes, and the foolish Jews still keep to that law, waiting for the Messiah and not knowing He has already come," the archbishop said. He did not sound so scornful now, only contemptuous of the ignorant, stubborn Hebrews.

"But for us Christians—" Argyros began.

Excitement flamed on the archbishop's face. He broke in, "Yes, by all the saints! For us Christians, since God has appeared among us and become a part of history, we can properly portray His human form!"

"To say otherwise would be to deny the validity of the Incarnation."

"It would! It would!" The archbishop shot from his chair as if he had sat on a pin. His shout filled the room: "I have it!" Almost word for word, he bellowed out the chain of thought Argyros had developed.

There was silence for half a minute when he was through. Then the prelates and savants crowded round the archbishop, slapping his back and showering him with congratulations. Eutropios kissed him on both cheeks. The patriarch was fairly babbling in his relief; he had been quivering at the prospect of having to report failure to Nikephoros.

"Wine!" he shouted to a servant. "Wine for everyone!" Under his breath, Argyros heard him mutter, "Saved from Kherson!" The monastery at Kherson, on the peninsula that jutted into the Black Sea from the north, was the bleakest place of exile in the Empire. Argyros had been to the godforsaken town in his younger days. No wonder poor Eutropios was nervous, he thought.

The magistrianos slipped out of the patriarchal residence while the celebration was just getting started. He did his best to fight down his anger at the archbishop's stealing his ideas. No way to claim them back now. Even if he did stand well with the Master of Offices, that meant little to the ecclesiastics he had left.

Perhaps it was just as well, he thought. Arsakios and the other icon-

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oclasts would be more likely to take seriously a proposal put forward by a churchman than one that came from an official of the imperial government.

The racket under the archbishop of Thessalonike's window was still going on. The miserable archbishop undoubtedly wished he was back conducting services at the church of St. Demetrios in his home town. Argyros went a couple of blocks out of his way, not wanting anything further to do with the vociferous Egyptian monks.

The magistrianos heard a low whistle from the direction of the hostel. A woman's voice, low and throaty, said, "There he is." Her Greek had a Persian flavor.

"Mirrane?" he called.

"Indeed, Basil. Did I not say, back in Daras, we would meet again?" Then, to her companions, she issued a sharp command: "Get him!"

The slap of their bare feet said they were Arsakios' monks. They came dashing down the narrow street toward Argyros. Some held torches to light their way, while others brandished clubs. "Heretic!" they shouted. "Worshiper of lifeless wood and pigment!"

Argyros turned and fled. A half-barbarous Franco-Saxon might have taken pride in a glorious fight against overwhelming odds; he was a sensible Roman, and saw no point in enduring a beating when he did not have to. A proverb survived from pagan days: "Even Hercules can't fight two."

As he ran, he wondered how Mirrane had known he was coming. She must have stopped by to see how her chanters were doing, and talked with the one of whom he had been asking questions. If he had come back the same way he had gone, he would have fallen into her hands. As it was, she had a gift for putting him in difficult spots.

It had been even worse in Daras, though. There she and her toughs had trapped him in the shop owned by one of her fellow conspirators. He still counted himself lucky to have gotten away with his life.

Now he was on the streets of his own city. He knew them; his pursuers did not. If they were going to catch him, they would have to work at it.

He darted through an alleyway that stank of rotten fish, turned sharply left and then right. He paused to catch his breath. Behind him he heard the monks arguing in Greek and hissing Coptic. "Split up! We'll find him!" one of them shouted.

Moving more quietly now, the magistrianos came to the mouth of a blind alley. He picked up half a brick and flung it at the wall that blocked the way, perhaps twenty paces down. It hit with a resounding crash. "Mother of God, what was that?" a woman cried from a second-story bedroom. Several dogs yapped frantically.

"There he is!" The shout came from three directions at once, but none

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of the monks sounded close. Argyros hurried down a lane that ended about three minutes' walk from his home.

At the first cross street, he almost bumped into a monk. It was hard to say which was the more surprised. But the monk had only Mirrane's description of him. That led to a fatal second of doubt. Argyros hit him in the face, then stamped on his unshod foot. As the monk started to crumple, the magistrianos kicked him in the pit of the stomach, which not only put him out of the fight but also kept him too busy trying to breathe to be able to cry out. The whole encounter lasted only a few heartbeats.

Argyros turned onto his own street. He walked along jauntily, pleased at having escaped Mirrane's trap. She had been someone to fear in Daras, he thought, but here at the heart of the Empire all the advantage was on his side.

Thus filled with himself, he did not see the dark-cloaked figure come out of a shadowed doorway and glide after him. Nor, thinking back on it, did he really hear anything, but at the last moment he sensed the rush of air from behind. He threw himself to one side, far enough to keep the knife that should have slipped between his ribs from doing more than taking a small, hot bite out of his left arm.

He stumbled away, groping for his dagger. His foe pursued. Starlight glittered coldly off the assassin's blade. Argyros' own knife came free. He dropped into a crouch, his arms outspread, and began slowly circling to his right.

Seeing he knew what he was about, his attacker went into a like posture. They moved warily, each seeking an opening. The assassin leaped forward, stabbing up from below, underarm style. The magistrianos knocked his knife hand aside with his own left forearm, stepped in close and thrust himself. His blow was similarly parried. Both men sprang back, resumed their circling dance.

Argyros' eyes flicked to one side. He was in front of his neighbor Theognostos' house. He took a few cautious steps backwards, dragging his heel to feel at the hard-packed ground under his feet. Then he staggered and, with a groan, went to one knee.

Laughing—the first sound he had made in the whole encounter—the assassin rushed toward him, knife upraised for the easy kill. His right foot came down in the same hole the magistrianos had walked around earlier in the evening. His arms flailed as he strove for balance. Argyros lunged forward under his faltering stroke and buried his dagger in his foe's belly.

The iron scent of blood and the death-stench of suddenly loosed bowels filled the street. "Sneaky—bastard," the assassin wheezed. His eyes rolled up in his head as he fell.

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Argyros approached him with caution, wondering if he was hoarding his last strength for a try at vengeance. But his assailant was truly dead, as the magistrianos found by feeling for a pulse at his ankle. He turned the man onto his back. This was no monk from Alexandria, but a Constantinopolitan street tough. Argyros knew the breed, with their half-shaven heads and puff-sleeved tunics pulled tight at the wrist by drawstrings.

Something had jingled as the man bonelessly went over. There was a well-filled purse at his belt. The magistrianos tucked it into his own beltpouch and, sighing, went to look for a guardsman.

What with explanations, formal statements, and such, Argyros did not see his bed until dawn was beginning to lighten the eastern horizon. The sun streaming through the window woke him much sooner than he wanted. He splashed cool water on his face, but that did nothing to relieve the gritty feeling in his eyes, the tiredness that made him fumble as he laced up his sandals.

He also had trouble remembering why his pouch was heavier than it should have been. Digging, he found the little leather sack he had taken from his assailant. The nomismata that rolled into his hand were smaller and thicker than the goldpieces minted in Constantinople. Instead of the familiar CONOB mintmark, they bore the legend AΛEXi, for Alexandria.

The magistrianos nodded, unsurprised. He should have figured Mirrane would have more than one string for her bow. Woman or not, she knew her business. It was unfortunate, he thought, that part of that business was getting rid of him.

The Emperor attended the second session of the ecumenical council, as he had the first. This time his retinue included fewer courtiers and more imperial guardsmen. Their gilded armor and scarlet capes were hardly less splendid than the costumes of the great prelates whom they faced, impassive, over their painted shields.

The hint of force, however, did nothing to deter Arsakios. He returned to the same respectful attack he had launched against the images the previous day. He even allowed a sardonic grin to flicker on his lips as he reiterated his theological paradox.

But his amusement slipped when Eutropios was quick to reply. The patriarch of Constantinople surreptitiously glanced down at his notes from time to time, but his presentation of the ideas hammered out only the night before was clear and lucid. George Lakhanodrakon paid him the highest compliment: "I didn't think the old fraud had it in him."

"Amazing what fear will do," Argyros agreed.

Yet anyone who had expected the patriarch of Alexandria and his followers to yield tamely to Eutropios' defense of images and their ven-

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eration was wrong. No sooner had Eutropios finished than half a dozen eastern bishops were shouting at each other for the privilege of replying.

"Why should I hear you?" Eutropios thundered from the pulpit as Nikephoros III watched. "By denying the reality of the Incarnation, you deny Christ's perfect humanity and brand yourself monophysites!"

"Liar!" "Fool!" "Impious idiot!" "How can base matter depict divine holiness?" Turmoil reigned for several minutes as iconoclasts and iconophiles hurled abuse at one another. The two sides went from there to shaking fists and croziers, and seemed about to repeat on a larger scale the squabbling that had gone on in Eutropios' apartments.

The Emperor Nikephoros uttered a low-voiced command. His bodyguards advanced two paces, their iron-shod boots clattering on the stone floor. Sudden silence fell. The Emperor spoke: "The truth should be sought through contemplation and reason, not in this childish brawling." He nodded to Eutropios. "Let them all speak, that errors may be demonstrated and those who wander be returned to the proper path."

The patriarch bowed in obedience to his master. The debate began in more orderly fashion. Argyros listened for a while, and was impressed to find that many of the points the opponents of images raised had been anticipated the night before. When an iconoclast bishop from Palestine, for example, claimed that icons were of the same substance as their prototypes, the skinny little man who had thought of that problem used elegant Aristotelean logic to deny their consubstantiality.

Biblical quotations and texts taken from the church fathers flew like rain. After a while, Argyros regretfully tore himself away from the argumentation and left for the Praitorion to try to catch up on the work he had neglected for the sake of the council.

Arsakios' monks were very much in evidence on his short walk down the Mese. During the day, they scattered through the city to preach the dogmas of iconoclasm to whoever would listen. The magistrianos passed no fewer than three, each with a good-sized crowd around him.

"Do you want to be monophysites?" the first monk shouted to his audience.

"No!" "Of course not!" "Never!" "Dig up the monophysites' bones!"

"Do you want to be Nestorians?"

The same cries of rejection came from the crowd.

"Then cast aside the pernicious, lying images you wrongly reverence!"

Some of his listeners gave back catcalls and hisses, but most looked thoughtful. A couple of hundred yards down the street, another Egyptian was preaching the same message in almost identical words. It was Argyros' turn for thought, mostly about the organization that was implied. He suspected Mirrane's hand there; she had been extremely efficient in her placard campaign at Daras. The clergy of Constantinople far out-

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numbered Arsakios' determined band, but they were not prepared for such a disciplined assault on their beliefs. By the time they realized the danger, it might be too late.

Full of such gloomy musings, the magistrianos climbed the stairs to his office. To his surprise, his dour secretary greeted him with enthusiasm. "How now, Anthimos?" he asked, bemused.

"If you're really back at it, maybe I'll be able to catch up on my own work for a change," his secretary said.

"Ah." That, sadly, was a reason altogether in accord with Anthimos' nature. Still, the warmth of the secretary's first response left Argyros more effusive than he usually would have been. He gossiped on about the proceedings of the ecumenical council; Anthimos, a typical Constantinopolitan, listened avidly.

His long, narrow face froze in disapproving lines as the magistrianos described the battalion of monks harassing their opponents by night and advancing their own cause by day. "They'll pay for their impudence in the next world," he predicted with grim relish.

"That's as may be," Argyros said, "but they're a damnable nuisance in this one. What happens if the council ends up deciding the icons are proper and the city mob tears Hagia Sophia down around its ears because they've all decided the images are traps of Satan to drag them down to hell?"

Anthimos clucked distressfully. "Our own priests and monks should settle these upstart Egyptians."

"So they should, but will they? Most especially, will they in time, before the city gets convinced iconoclasm is right?" Argyros explained his pessimistic reasoning as he had walked from the great church.

"But there are many more clerics native to Constantinople than the Alexandrian has brought," Anthimos protested. "They should be able to vanquish them in debate by sheer weight of numbers, if in no other way."

"But too many keep silent." Argyros paused. " 'Sheer weight of numbers,' " he echoed. His voice went dreamy, his eyes far away.

"Sir?" Anthimos said nervously, after the magistrianos had stayed absolutely still for three solid minutes. If Argyros heard, he gave no sign.

Another little while went by before he stirred. When at last he did, it was into a blur of activity that made his secretary jump in alarm. "What are you loafing there for?" Argyros snapped unfairly. "Get me ten thousand sheets of papyrus—get it out of storage, beg it, or borrow it from anyone who has it, but get it. No—go to Lakhanodrakon first; get a letter of authorization from him. That way you won't have arguments. When you've brought the papryus back, round up fifty men. Try and get them from all parts of the city. Tell them to come here tomorrow morning; tell

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them it's three miliaresia for every man. The prospect of silverpieces should get their attention. Do you have all that?"

"No," Anthimos said; he found the magistrianos worse as King Stork than as King Log. "But it's to do with those damned clay lumps of yours, isn't it?"

"With the archetypes, yes," Argyros said impatiently. "By the Virgin, we'll see who shouts down whom! Now, here's what I told you—" Only slightly slower than in his outburst of a moment before, he repeated his orders to Anthimos, ticking off points one by one on his fingers. This time, his secretary scrawled shorthand notes, his pen racing to keep up with Argyros' thoughts.

"Better make it a hundred men," the magistrianos said. "Some won't show up. And on your way to the Master of Offices, stop at the shop of Stavrakios the potter and send him to me."

"I'll do whatever you say, as long as you don't set me to spelling words backwards and upside down," Anthimos declared. Argyros had had him help in arranging the text of George Lakhanodrakon's epic poem, but he could not get the hang of it.

"I won't, I promise," the magistrianos said. He was still burning with urgency. "Go on! Go on!"

Anthimos had hardly slammed the door behind him before Argyros was setting a square metal frame on an iron pan and painting the surface of the pan with glue. On shelves beside his desk he kept jars of clay archetypes: rectangular blocks of fired clay with reversed letters on one end, so that when they were inked the images on the papyrus would come out the right way.

Images again, he thought. If the Egyptian monks had abhorred them before, they would really hate them soon.

He was still composing the text of his message when someone tapped on the door. "Come in," he called, and Stavrakios did. He was surprised the potter had got there so fast; Anthimos must have headed for his shop on the dead run.

"What can I do for you today, sir?" Stavrakios asked. He was a stocky man of about Argyros' age, with open, intelligent features and the hands of an artist: large, long-fingered, delicate. Those hands, and the native wit guiding them, made him the perfect man to produce the molds that in turn shaped the archetypes in clay.

"I want a set of archetypes five times the usual size of our letters," the magistrianos said, hastily adding, "I don't mean I want the blocks five times as tall. I want them the same height as the rest. I just want the letters five times as big, so people can read them at a distance."

"I understand," Stavrakios said at once. He tugged his beard in

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thought. "You won't be able to get much of a message on your sheet with letters that size."

"I realize that," Argyros said, nodding in respect for the potter's quick thinking. "I just need one line, to draw people's attention. The rest of the page will be made from regular archetypes."

"Ah. That's all right, then." Stavrakios considered. "If you'll tell me the one line, I can make it as a single unit. That will be faster than doing the mold for each new archetype by itself. From what your secretary said, or what I understood of it through his panting, you'll want this fast as I can make it."

Argyros nodded, and told Stavrakios what he needed. The potter, a pious man, crossed himself. "Well, of course He did. Is there anything more? No? Then I'm off. I'll bring you the line directly it's done."

"That's splendid, Stavrakios," the magistrianos said gratefully. The potter left. Argyros went back to composing, setting letters in the frame one by one. Every so often he would spot an error or come up with a better idea, and have to pull a few archetypes—once, a whole line—out of the glue, which was starting to get tacky.

A commotion on the stairs gave him an excuse to stop. He stepped out of his office, and was almost run down by a stream of workmen carrying boxes. "Where you want these, pal?" the one in front asked.

"In there," he said weakly, pointing. He had worked with papyrus in lots of a few hundred sheets at a time. He had never thought about how much room ten thousand sheets would require. They ended up taking over his office. When Anthimos got back, Argyros congratulated him on a job well done and sent him out again for more ink.

Then it was just a matter of waiting for Stavrakios to get back. It was late afternoon when the potter came in, carrying a bundle wrapped in several thicknesses of cloth. "Fresh from the kiln and still hot," he said, walking crab-fashion between the mountains of boxes to hand his prize to the magistrianos.

"Let me undo the swaddling clothes here," Argyros said. Thanks to the potter's warning, he left cloth between the new-fired clay and his fingers. "Oh yes, very fine. People should be able to read that a block away. I'd say you've earned yourself a nomisma, Stavrakios."

"For this little thing? You're crazy," the potter said, but he made the coin disappear.

The magistrianos set the big line of text in the space he had reserved for it at the top of the frame. He took a flat board and laid it over his composition to force all the letters down to exactly the same level. When he was satisfied, he inked a paintbrush and ran it over the letters, gently pressed a sheet of papyrus down on them. After reading the result, he used a tweezer to pluck out a couple of improper letters and insert re-

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placements. Then he lit a brazier. Once it was hot, he put the frame and tray on a rack above it to dry the glue and lock the letters in their places.

He used the cloths Stavrakios had brought to remove the tray and frame from the brazier, and to protect his desktop from the hot metal. As soon as they were cool, he inked the letters, imprinted a piece of parchment, set it to one side, plied the inky brush again.

Ink, press, set aside; ink, press, set aside. His world narrowed to the brush, the tray and frame full of letters, the box of papyrus from which he was pulling sheets. When he emptied a box, he would fill it with imprinted papyri and go on to the next one. That was the only break in the routine consuming him.

After some eternal time, he realized it was too dark to see the letters in front of him. He also realized he was cramped and hungry. He went out and bought a chunk of bread, some goat's-milk cheese, and a cup of wine from a little eatery near the Praitorion. Then, sighing, he went back to his office, lit a lamp, and got back to work.

A half-moon rose in the southeast over Hagia Sophia, so it had to be close to midnight. The magistrianos was a bit more than halfway done. He labored on, steady as a waterwheel, only pausing to yawn. He had not had much sleep the night before, and it did not look as though he would get much tonight.

Darkness still ruled the city when he finally finished, but by the stars he could see through the window it would not last long. He filled the last box with papyri, set it to one side. Then he sat down to rest, just for a moment.

Anthimos' voice woke him: "Sir?"

He roused with a start, crying, "Nails! St. Andrew preserve us, I forgot nails!"

His secretary held up a jingling leather sack. "I have them. There are more downstairs, along with the men I hired, or as many of them as showed up. They can use stones or bricks for hammers."

"Excellent, excellent." When Argyros rose, his abused shoulders gave twin creaks of protest. He followed his secretary out to the Mese, where a crowd of men waited. Most of them were raggedly dressed. "First things first," the magistrianos said, fighting back a yawn. "Let's have some of you come up with me and haul some boxes down here."

A dozen men went upstairs with him. "First time I been in *this* part o' the building," one said. Several more chuckled: along with its offices, the Praitorion also served as a prison.

Once the papryi were downstairs, the magistrianos distributed them among the men Anthimos had assembled, then gave his instructions: "Post these in prominent spots—at streetcorners, on tavern doors if you like. But don't go in the taverns, not till you're done."

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That got a laugh, as he had expected. He went on, "I'll give you one miliaresion now, and two more when you're done. And don't think you can chuck your share of the work down the nearest privy and get paid for doing nothing, either. Someone will have an eye on you all the time, sure as I'm a magistrianos." He was lying through his teeth, but the men looked fearful, and one or two of them disappointed. As secret agents, magistrianoi had a reputation for owning all sorts of unpleasant—possibly unnatural—abilities.

His gang of men trooped off; before long, he heard the first sounds of pounding. This time he could not hold back his yawn. He said, "Anthimos, pay them as they come back. I can't stay awake any longer. I'm going back to my office to sleep; I don't think I'd make it home. Wake me in the early afternoon, would you?"

"Whatever you say," Anthimos agreed dolefully.

Argyros thought he could have slept in the fiery furnace prepared for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. By the time Anthimos shook him awake, his office was a fair approximation of it, with Constantinople's summer mugginess only making things worse. The magistrianos wiped sweat from his face with his sleeve.

"Like Satan," he told Anthimos, "I am going up and down in the city, to see how my work has turned out."

He had only walked twenty paces when he saw his first poster. Only the headline was visible above the crowd of people in front of it. Argyros was pleased at how far away he could read that message: "CHRIST DIED FOR YOU."

The rest of the handbill was a boiled-down version of the argument that came from the gathering at the patriarchal residence: that once God became man too, His humanity was portrayable, and that to say otherwise was to deny the truth of the Incarnation. The broadside concluded: "Impious men have come to Constantinople to reject the images, and to try to force their will on the ecumenical council the Emperor has convened. Don't let them succeed."

There was a continual low mutter around the poster. Not everyone in Constantinople, of course, could read, but close to half the men and a good fraction of the women did know how. Those who were literate passed the text on to their letterless friends and spouses.

"I don't know," a man said, scratching himself. "I don't want to be one of those accursed Nestorians the Egyptian monks go on about."

"Do you want to go to hell?" someone else demanded. "Without Christ, what are we but Satan's meat?" The people close by him nodded agreement.

"I don't know," the first man said again. "I have Christ in my heart. Why do I need an icon, if having one makes me a heretic?"

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"You're a heretic now, for talking that way!" a woman screeched, and threw an apple at him. That seemed to be the signal for several people to advance on the would-be iconoclast. He fled.

Argyros smiled to himself and kept walking down the Mese. He heard one of Arsakios' monks preaching to a crowd, but now the cleric had to shout against hecklers and continually backtrack to try to defend what he was saying.

People were trickling into the Augusteion, gathering in front of the atrium of Hagia Sophia. The palace guards outside the great church looked at the growing crowd with suspicion. Here and there a guardsman hefted a spear or loosened a sword in a scabbard, readying himself for trouble.

Men and women began shouting down the Egyptian monks in the Augusteion, then raised a chant of their own: "Dig up the iconoclasts' bones! Dig up the iconoclasts' bones!" At that old Constantinopolitan riot call, all the guardsmen looked to their weapons. But the swelling crowd showed no inclination to attack. Instead, they stood and shouted, the noise rising like the tide. Argyros wondered how Arsakios, inside Hagia Sophia, enjoyed this new din.

He saw one of the monks who had accompanied the patriarch of Alexandria tear a handbill from the front of a building, hurl it to the ground, and step on it in execration. A moment later the monk was on the ground himself, taking a drubbing from several Constantinopolitans. They were shouting, "Blasphemer! Atheist!" as they pummeled him.

That night it was Arsakios who got no sleep. A throng of people ringed the monastery of Stoudios, where the Alexandrian delegation was staying. Their racket kept half the city up. It bothered Argyros not at all. He reveled in his first full night of sleep since the ecumenical council had begun.

In the morning, the Augusteion was packed even tighter than it had been the day before. The magistrianos was glad he had dressed in his most resplendent robe; the fancy outfit made people press back to let him by as he made his way toward Hagia Sophia . . . except for one young woman who clasped his hand, saying, "Bless me, your reverence!"

"First time I've ever been mistaken for an archbishop," he remarked to George Lakhanodrakon once he was inside the great church.

"I daresay," the Master of Offices chuckled. "You've been a busy lad with the archetypes, haven't you? You used so much papyrus, you'll make half the government grind to a halt."

Privately, the magistrianos could think of worse things. All he said, though, was, "I thought the situation demanded it."

"I suppose so." Lakhanodrakon shook his head in wonder. "What a curious thing: little sheets of papyrus rallying a people to a cause."

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"*Lots of little sheets of papyrus,*" the magistrianos pointed out. "Daras showed how words could stir a town close to rebellion. I thought they might work as well for the Empire's unity as against it, and on a larger scale than anything the Persians tried. With a new idea as powerful as the archetypes, discovering all the things they can do is as important as finding out about them in the first place."

"That's true." Lakhanodrakon did not seem sure he liked the notion. Then, remembering an ancient precedent, he brightened. "Caesar did something of this sort, did he not, posting a daily bulletin of events in the Forum of Rome for the people to read?"

"Yes, I—" Argyros broke off when an altarboy came trotting up and asked which of the gentlemen was Basil Argyros. "I am," the magistrianos said.

"Here, then, sir," the altarboy said, handing him a note. "The lady told me to give this to you."

Lakhanodrakon raised an eyebrow. "The lady?"

Argyros was reading. "It's not signed," he said, but he had no trouble figuring out who the lady was. The note read: "If you care to, meet me this afternoon in front of the shop of Joshua Samuel's son in the coppersmiths' quarter. Come alone. Be sure that if you are not alone, you will not see me. By the supreme god of light Ormazad I swear I shall also be alone; may I be damned to Ahriman's hell if I lie."

"An old acquaintance," he told the Master of Offices while he thought it over. He was certain he would not be able to ambush Mirrane; if she said she could escape a trap, she could. He knew her skill from Daras. What he did not know was how much trust to put in her oath. There was no stronger one a follower of Zoroaster—as most Persians were—could swear. But many so-called Christians would cheerfully invoke Father, Son, and Holy Spirit whenever it was to their advantage.

"I need to get away this afternoon," he said, making his decision. Lakhanodrakon nodded, smirking; no doubt he thought Argyros had made an assignation. Recalling Mirrane's other talents, the magistrianos half-wished it were so.

The district of the coppersmiths lay not far from the Augusteion, but it might have been a world away. Here, as nowhere else in the city, Argyros' handbills earned no more than a passing glance. Most of the metalworkers were Jews; Christian doctrinal disputes concerned them only if likely to lead to persecution.

Questions led Argyros to the shop Mirrane had named. Passersby eyed his fine robes with curiosity. A crone limped past, her gray hair ragged, a wine-colored birthmark disfiguring one cheek. The magistrianos waited impatiently, wondering if Mirrane had lured him here so she could work some mischief elsewhere unimpeded.

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"Have I changed so much then, Basil?"

He whirled at the unexpected sound of that smooth, familiar contralto. The crone was leaning against a wall, saucily grinning his way. The sparkling brown eyes might have belonged to the woman he had known, but—

She laughed, seeing his stricken expression. Three of her teeth were black. She tapped one of them with a grimy forefinger. "It all washes off, even this. I've not aged thirty years overnight, I assure you, for which the god of light be praised."

"A good disguise," he said, giving credit where it was due and hoping his relief did not show. Beauty was too rare in the world to be wasted. That, he thought, was why he had instinctively rejected iconoclasm, all theological considerations aside. But Mirrane was too dangerous to let even remembered beauty lull him. "What sort of murderous scheme do you have planned for today, since your last two went awry?"

"None, now, I'm sorry to say," she smiled. "What would be the point? The council is already going the wrong way. Arsakios will squirm and fuss and fight through both the Old and New Testaments of your Bible, but he will lose the fight, whether or not he knows it; the Emperor and most of the church are against him. The only real hope was to raise the city mob against the icons, and that seems to have failed. . . . Was it your idea, spreading those handbills far and wide?"

"Yes."

Mirrane sighed. "I thought as much. Such a pity you escaped my monks, and the knifeman. I thought you might have lost your wariness, once the first attack failed."

"The second one almost did catch me napping," he admitted. He explained how he had beaten the hired killer; Mirrane grimaced in chagrin. He said, "I'm sure you would have got free of any trap I set in Ctesiphon or Ecbatana; operating on home ground is always an advantage."

It was odd, talking so with a professional from the other side. Argyros had worked many times against agents of the Persian Empire, and Mirrane against the Romans, but despite their masters' agelong rivalry, their posts gave them more in common than either had with fellow citizens.

Mirrane must have been thinking along the same lines. She said, "A shame we could not act together once, instead of against each other."

He nodded, but said, "Not likely, I fear."

"One never knows. The nomads on the northern plains are stirring, and they threaten the Roman Empire as much as Persia. Against them, we could share a common goal."

"Maybe," Argyros said for politeness' sake, though he did not believe

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it. He changed the subject. "What will you do now that you no longer need your liaison with Arsakios?"

"Him I'll not be sorry to leave," she said with a curl of her lip. "You were much more enjoyable, those couple of times in Daras." She chuckled as the flush mounted under his swarthy skin. She returned to his question: "I suppose I'll travel back to Persia, to see where the Grand Wazir will send me next: maybe into the Caucasus, to turn a client-king toward Ormazd and away from Christ."

"I think not," Argyros said, and leaped at her. The two of them *were* alone, he was certain. He was bigger, stronger, and quicker than Mirrane, and she was too great a threat to the Empire to let her leave Constantinople.

She made no move to flee. For an instant, in fact, she pressed herself against him as he seized her, and he felt the ripe body her old dirty clothes concealed. Her lips brushed his cheek; he heard her laugh softly in his ear.

Then she was fighting like a wildcat, and crying, "Help! Help! This Christian seeks to ravish me!"

Men came boiling out of shops all along the street. They converged on the struggling couple, some brandishing makeshift bludgeons, others armed only with their fists. They tore Argyros away from Mirrane, shouting, "Leave her alone!" "You gentile dog, you think because you have money you can take any woman who pleases you?" "See how you like this!"

"Let go of me!" Argyros yelled, struggling against the angry coppersmiths. "I am a—" Somebody hit him in the pit of the stomach, leaving him unable to speak. Fighting on instinct alone, he grabbed a man and pulled the fellow down on top of him to protect him from the Jews' punches and kicks.

At last he managed to suck in a long, delicious lungful of air. "Stop, you fools!" he shouted from beneath his unwilling shield. "I am a magistrianos of the Emperor, making an arrest!"

The mention of his rank was enough to freeze his attackers for a moment. "It was no rape," he went on into the sudden silence. "The woman is an agent of Persia, and not even a Jew. Bring her here and I will prove it to you. And if you help me find her, I will forget your assault on me—you were deceived."

With a grunt, Argyros got to his feet and helped up the smith who had covered him. The man was holding his ribs and groaning; he had taken a worse beating than the magistrianos. The rest of the coppersmiths scattered, some dashing this way, some that.

By then, though, Mirrane had disappeared.

* * *

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The shafts of sunlight streaming through the windows that pierced the base of Hagia Sophia's great dome were paler than they had been when the ecumenical council convened two months before. High summer was past, and fall approaching; if the assembled clerics were to return to their churches this year, they would have to sail soon, before the stormy season set in.

With the rest of the court, Basil Argyros stood in the aisle listening to the patriarch Eutropios read out the acts of the council. "Anyone who declares henceforth that an icon is a graven image, let him be anathema," the patriarch intoned.

"Let him be anathema," the ecclesiastics echoed.

"Anyone who declares henceforth that to paint an image or give reverence to an image is either Nestorian or monophysite, let him be anathema," Eutropios said.

"Let him be anathema," the clerics agreed. Argyros glanced toward Arsakios of Alexandria, who joined in the anathema with poor grace. Only that "henceforth" preserved his orthodoxy. If it had not been conceded, however, he might have led his see into schism and more strife.

"Anyone who declares henceforth that our incarnate Lord Jesus Christ may not be depicted, let him be anathema."

"Let him be anathema."

"Anyone who declares henceforth that—" The anathemas rolled on and on. When they were finally through, Eutropios bowed his head and went on, "With the aid and intercession of the Holy Spirit, we have determined and do proclaim these the true and correct doctrines of our holy orthodox church. Anathema to any man who dares contradict them."

"Amen," said everyone in the church, prelates and courtiers together. The Emperor Nikephoros rose from his high seat, bowed to the clerics, and left the church.

"This council now is ended," Eutropios said, and let out an inconspicuous sigh of relief. As he left the pulpit, ecclesiastics began hurrying away; sailors would not put to sea in stormy weather even for archbishops.

The courtiers followed more slowly. "Once again, error is driven from the church," George Lakhanodrakon said, rubbing his large, knobby-knuckled hands in satisfaction.

"Is it?" Argyros asked with some bitterness. The Master of Offices turned to look at him sharply. He went on, "How can we have the gall to claim the Holy Spirit descended to inspire the ecumenical council? It was a Persian scheme that threw fuel on the controversy in the first place, and pamphleteering that helped swing it back toward the way the Emperor wanted it to go. Not much room for divine intervention in any of that."

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"Wasn't it you who said we'd have to help the Holy Spirit along?" Lakhanodrakon reminded him. "God works through men; that is why He created them, to unfold his scheme for the world." He patted the magistrianos on the shoulder. "You were also the one who pointed out that God had to become a man to save mankind."

Both men crossed themselves. "Yes, but that was a miracle," Argyros persisted.

"Must all your miracles be showy?" the Master of Offices asked. "St. Athanasios and St. Cyril of Alexandria, if you read their writings, show themselves to be arrogant men, hungry for power. Yet the doctrines they fought for, we still hold today, though the one has been dead almost a thousand years and the other close to nine hundred. Is that not something of a miracle?"

"Put that way, I suppose it is. And yet—"

"I know," Lakhanodrakon sighed. "Examined closely, any human institution is sadly imperfect; with your job, you know that better than most. Should you be shocked it's also true of the church? If you still hanker for miracles, I'll give you one: in Egypt, Palestine, and Anatolia; in Thrace and the lands by the Danube; in Italia and Carthage and Ispania, churchmen will be going home from this council all bearing the same doctrines to pass them on in their sees, and all over the Empire townsmen who will never see Constantinople, farmers who could never even imagine Constantinople, will hear the same teachings and follow them, and so will their sons and grandsons after them. If that is not a miracle, what is it?"

"It might just be good organization," Argyros said. "Those same peasants and townsmen pay their taxes to the government every year, and so will their sons and grandsons."

Lakhanodrakon frowned at his obstinacy, then gave a snort of laughter. He said, "Too damned many of them don't. And the Holy Spirit doesn't inspire tax-collectors, either; of that I'm woefully certain. They have to do the best they can, the same as you and I and poor Eutropios swimming out of his depth."

" 'The best they can,' " Argyros mused. He thought it over. "That's not so bad, I suppose." He and the Master of Offices walked down the Mese toward the Praitorion. He wondered what Anthimos would have waiting for him there. ●

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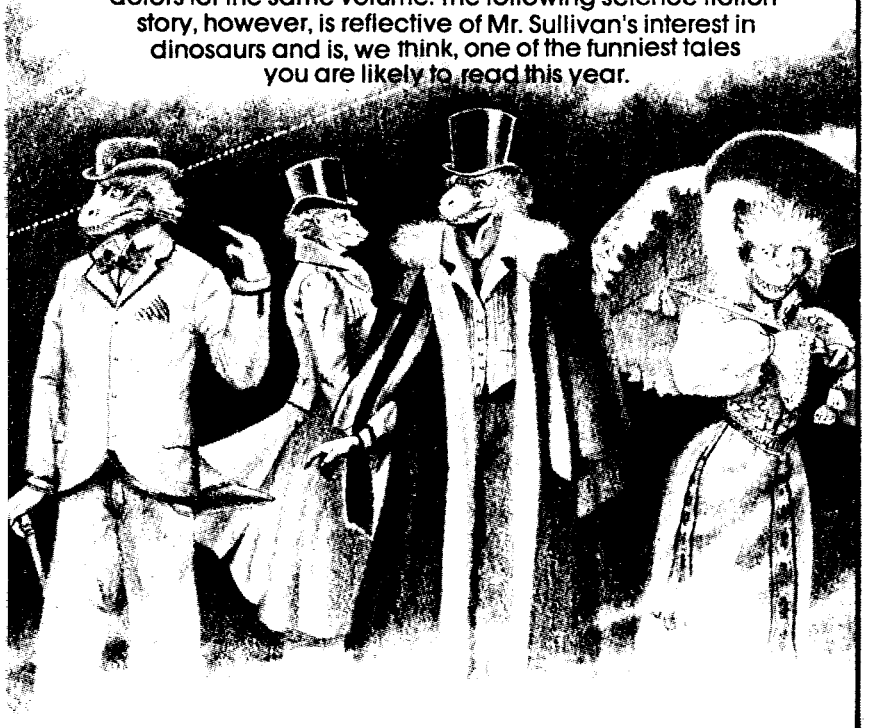
by Tim Sullivan

DINOSAUR ON A BICYCLE

The author has written some fifty pieces on horror films for the upcoming Viking *Encyclopedia of Horror and the Supernatural*, as well as a number of biographies of noted horror film directors and actors for the same volume. The following science fiction story, however, is reflective of Mr. Sullivan's interest in dinosaurs and is, we think, one of the funniest tales you are likely to read this year.



art: Bob Walters

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Harry Quince-Pierpont Fotheringay climbed onto the enormous penny-farthing bicycle and began pedalling. His three-toed, booted talons fit snugly over the pedals, and vapor steamed from his snout in the morning chill. His kid gloves did not prevent the metallic cold of the handlebars from penetrating his clawed hands. Nor did his greatcoat, jodhpurs and tam-o-shanter help a great deal, either. He should have picked a warmer day to travel backwards in time.

But there was no turning back now. A smattering of applause rose from the audience surrounding the chronokineticon, as the chain attached to the bicycle's huge front wheel began to turn the ponderous gears Harry had so meticulously helped design and build over the past seven years. He was the only assistant of his learned friend, Sir Brathwaite Smedley-Groat, M.S.E., Ph.D. (Member of the Saurian Empire, Doctor of Philosophy), whose brainchild the chronokineticon was.

"I *say*, Harry, can't you set about this with just a trifle more vigour?" Sir Brathwaite called, speaking from outside the chronokineticon's perimeter. He sat on a shooting stool, tail wrapped around its wooden stem, observing the machine's whirling clockwork movements and timing the revolutions of the great main wheel with a stopwatch. He wore a bowler hat, greatcoat, leggings and a colourful scarf. His forked tongue flicked nervously in and out of his mouth. "Put a little more muscle into it, can't you, old thing? There's a good lad! Push! Push *harder!*"

It was all Harry could do to stop himself from shouting an angry reply. While Harry groaned and sweated at the pedals, Sir Brathwaite sent his liveried servant scurrying off through the crowd to purchase a cup of hot tea to keep the cold from his ageing bones. Vendors, many of them small hatchling urchins, peddled not only tea, but hot chestnuts, batter-fried insects, mulled wine, ale, and a variety of other comestibles. There were nearly a thousand souls gathered at this meadow on the outskirts of the university, here to watch the chronokineticon's maiden voyage. The presence of these refined gentlesaurians—the ladies attired in feathered hats, hoop skirts, furs and mufflers; their dashing male companions in starched white collars, top hats, tails, morning coats and umbrellas—all avidly peering at the chronokineticon through their lorgnettes, monocles, and pince-nezes, caused Harry to remain silent in spite of Sir Brathwaite's typical insensitivity. This auspicious day would not be marred by a display of ill manners on *his* part. After all, he could have told Sir Brathwaite to find someone else, but *he* had wanted to be the chronokineticon's first pilot from the moment he had heard about his mentor's plans to build the fantastical machine. It seemed safe enough, especially considering Sir Brathwaite's calculations indicating that the chronokineticon could only stay in the past for six hours. The Law of Forward Time Conversion, as Sir Brathwaite somewhat grandly called it, would perforce

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come into play after that. Thus only a short junket in the prehistoric past would be possible, and this was a pleasant enough prospect, at least as far as Harry was concerned. He was, after all, a student of sauriankind's remote ancestors, and he wanted to see those ancient titans for himself at least once. Sir Brathwaite *had* mentioned something about regression and de-evolution once or twice, but had assured Harry that such a possibility was unlikely in the extreme.

"Faster, Harry, *faster!*" urged Sir Brathwaite. Seeing that the servant had returned, running all the way to insure that the tea remained hot, Sir Brathwaite took time out from browbeating Harry long enough to accept the cup. "There's a good fellow," he said absently to the panting servant, before returning to the business at hand. "Really, Harry, old chap, I *must* say, you'll have to do better than *that*, you know!"

Harry watched steam rise from the tea cup with envy, though his exertions were at last warming him up a bit. The bicycle had been constructed three times the normal size—the better to power the chronokineticon—and the muscles in his legs strained as he pedaled harder, his heart pounding. Soon he was perspiring freely, but he couldn't stop working long enough to unbutton his greatcoat.

Harry pedalled until he began to wonder if this contraption of chain-driven wheels and cogs was going to do anything except whirl about him. Sir Brathwaite's scientific studies had indicated that a time-line opened into the past from this very spot. Unfortunately, this marvel of nature could only be exploited through the use of an intricate clockwork device such as the one Harry powered with his legs at this moment. Or so Sir Brathwaite's calculations indicated . . . *if* they were correct. It wouldn't be the first of his inventions or theorems to fail miserably. There had been that wretched business with the automatic bustle-tightening machine, for instance. . . .

"By Jove, I believe something *is* happening," Sir Brathwaite said, waking Harry from his depressing reverie. "Jolly good!"

Sir Brathwaite was quite correct. There was another sudden burst of applause from the crowd, more enthusiastic this time, and Sir Brathwaite had time to call out, "Good show!" Then the ladies in their feathered, broad-brimmed hats were blurring out of focus, as were the gentlemen in their top hats and morning coats. The spectators and Sir Brathwaite, who was waving his cane excitedly, were now only ghostly figures on the greensward, mere spectres, fading into insubstantiality. As they vanished altogether, the sun suddenly arced overhead and set behind the hills to the *east* of the city.

The sun rose again, and was extinguished behind the hills in a matter of seconds. The flag-bedecked pavilion, which had been built for this very occasion, quickly disassembled itself. Harry pedaled ever faster, awed

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by the spectacle, hardly daring to believe it. He was actually *travelling through time*! Sunlight flashed and was cloaked with night, again and again, until the world flickered like a faulty electrical bulb. Soon the flickering became as quick as a hummingbird's wings—a dim, whirring light through which he could watch the world transform.

The university spires vanished. The city shrank to a huddled group of tiny buildings, then to a few simple shacks. Thatched huts appeared, but soon even these were gone. Trees multiplied, growing into forests that closed in thickly around the chronokineticon.

The trees disappeared, and rushing towards him over a suddenly barren plain was an immense glacier. Harry's tongue shot out in abject terror as the colossal wall of ice rumbled towards him. He closed his eyes and pedaled furiously. Somehow, he remained untouched when the glacier swallowed him. He was outside of time, he decided, invulnerable to the press of events—as long as he kept *moving*.

But he couldn't keep up this pace for much longer. He pedalled for what seemed like hours, encased in ice, and then, abruptly, the glacier was gone, retreating sullenly towards the northern horizon. As he watched, the hills in the distance changed shape, enlarging, their summits becoming more peaked.

Twice more the glaciers came and went, and when they had retreated for the last time, he noticed that the vegetation had changed too. The evergreens and birches had been replaced by ferns and cycads, vast jungles bordering morasses in which he glimpsed the movements of gigantic forms, of sinuous, snakelike necks lifting huge and dripping heads.

He had done it!

Harry slowed his pedaling and then stopped altogether. He had not realized that the chronokineticon was suspended a few meters in the air until it came crashing down, and he was sent sprawling into a clump of wildflowers. Panting, he sat up and took stock of his new surroundings. There was no doubt in his mind that he had gone all the way back to the Mesozoic. More specifically, to the Cretaceous. The colourful flowers that perfumed the air had not even existed until then.

He caught his breath as he inhaled their sweet fragrances, the distensible pouch below his jaws ballooning. Removing his winter clothing, Harry changed into a pith helmet, shorts, and tropical safari blouse, which he had stashed in a satchel underneath the bicycle. Carrying a small hammer for chipping geological samples, a hatchet, pad and pencil, and a watch, he stepped off the main wheel at the base of the chronokineticon, onto the soft humus of the prehistoric world.

An enormous dragonfly buzzed past his head. Other than that, the place was perfectly still . . . at least for the moment. Setting his watch at exactly twelve o'clock, Harry glanced back at the chronokineticon,

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which was partly hidden in a colourful tangle of wildflowers, before going on. Sir Brathwaite had yearned to claim the honor of being the first to go back to the Mesozoic for himself—or so he said, at any rate—but he simply did not possess Harry's youth and physical endurance, lacked the stamina to pedal hard enough, long enough. No, it made good logical sense that Harry should be the one to go. So here was Harry, seventy million years or so before his own birth, in a primitive world he'd never dreamt of actually seeing, until the brilliant if erratic Sir Brathwaite had stumbled upon the secret of time-travel. And Harry with a wife and hatchlings, too, back—or rather, forward—in the nineteenth century! He only hoped that Sir Brathwaite's theory about the time-line running to both past *and* future was correct.

The humidity was overpowering. Harry walked slowly, until he came to a forest of evergreens and odd, tufted trees. With the hatchet, he cut a notch in one of the latter to mark his trail.

Just as he finished chopping, he heard something move behind him.

Perhaps, he reasoned, it was only the chronokineticon. Sometimes the main wheel creaked a little. But this wasn't mere *creaking*, by any stretch of the imagination. It was more of a *rustling* sound . . . His throat pouch swelling in fear, Harry remembered the huge figures he had glimpsed before in the swamp. He turned slowly, so that he wouldn't disturb it . . . whatever *it* was.

A huge, beaked head was blinking at him. He could tell from its bony, hooded crest that it was a chasmosaurus. He had never expected one of his ancestors to be *pink*, but this one was, shockingly so. Its feathered legs were as big around as tree trunks. Luckily, it was a vegetarian. The only *real* danger lay in being trampled by it.

They were eye to eye, since the chasmosaurus was on four legs and the considerably more advanced Harry stood erect on two. The gargantuan creature exhibited little interest in Harry, however, despite their relative positions on the evolutionary scale. It lumbered past him and began to feed on ferns growing in the shadow of the forest.

Relieved, Harry removed the pad from his pocket and took down a few notes about the primitive creature's appearance and habits. When he had finished writing, he moved on into the dark, rich-smelling jungle. He wasn't likely to find any big carnivores in here, so it should be reasonably safe. If the going became too risky, he could always make a run for the chronokineticon and cycle his way back to the future. He hadn't planned to stay in the Cretaceous for more than an hour, and in any event he had no intention of letting the device very far out of his sight. If by some freak chance anything should happen to the chronokineticon, he thought with a nervous little shiver, he might very well find himself in a frightful fix. . . .

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Scratching an itching earhole with the tip of his tail, Harry began to force his way through the heavy foliage. He thought he heard voices from time to time, as he blazed a trail with his hatchet, but he dismissed them as a ringing in his ears, brought on by his chopping. As they grew louder, however, he stopped working and listened very carefully.

Peculiar, rasping sounds, muffled by the forest, they were nonetheless real for all of that. Voices. They were garbled, but possessed the undeniable rhythms of a speech pattern. Two voices, one high-pitched, the other low. Harry crept stealthily closer to the sounds, and spread two palm fronds . . . and there they were.

They stood erect and were dressed in silvery, tight-fitting outfits. Their heads were furry, and their faces were smooth, except for a handlebar-shaped crescent of hair on the larger one's upper lip. The other had swelling breasts and hips, suggesting that she was a female mammal of some sort. They were bulky, apelike things, very ugly . . . and yet they seemed to have a spoken language!

Talking apes! It was a concept almost too strange and horrible to contemplate. Where could such bizarre creatures have *come* from? They certainly weren't denizens of the Cretaceous. As they continued conversing in their gibbering voices, Harry winced at the harsh, guttural ugliness of their speech, not a single civilized sibilant from either of them. They were obviously sapient, though. They were clearly *talking*. Perhaps they had come from another planet . . . intelligences vast and cool, and unsympathetic, regarding this earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drawing their plans against it . . .

But somehow Harry doubted it. These creatures looked as if they had evolved right here on earth. They were bipeds, after all, and their heads were in the right place, with the requisite number of eyes, nostrils, and ears . . . though they did have a rather disgusting shell-like covering or growth over their earholes. Would a creature from another world be so like a saurian? Harry shuddered in distaste. So like . . . and yet so dreadfully *un*like . . .

Harry carefully took out the pad, fingers trembling with excitement. As he pressed the pencil down, the lead snapped.

Both of the creatures' heads jerked towards him. It was only then that Harry realized their eyes were in the *front* of their heads!

With lightning rapidity, the two simians removed metal objects that were clearly sidearms from their holsters, pointing them at the cycads behind which Harry hid. The big one roared, obviously commanding Harry to come out into the open. Frightened as he was, and unarmed save for the hammer and hatchet, Harry had no choice but to do as he was commanded. If only Sir Brathwaite had not been a pacifist as *well*

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as a vegetarian and a spiritualist, Harry might have been allowed to bring a revolver of his own! Feathers standing on end, he showed himself.

Apparently, the creatures had not expected anyone like Harry. Their eyes momentarily doubled in size, showing white around the irises. They were truly a wild and terrifying sight.

"Please don't shoot," Harry said, his voice cracking with fear.

They stared at him curiously. Didn't they realize he was speaking to them? Once they noticed his clothing, appurtenances and gentlemanly demeanor, surely they would put down their weapons and welcome him as a civilized fellow sapient. Instead, they began chattering like monkeys as he stepped into the dappled light of the clearing, waving their free hands about and shrieking in a rather uncouth—and certainly undignified—display of emotion. *Bad show*, Harry thought, trying to keep his lip from curling in disdain.

Once they calmed down a bit, the female beckoned for Harry to come closer. He walked slowly towards them, tail twitching, open hands held out before him.

The smaller creature, whose voice, although still raucous, was at least a bit more melodious than that of her companion, rattled off a long string of croaking, nonsense words. The big male shrugged, and they both holstered their weapons. They were at least as nervous as Harry, but their friendly behaviour seemed a good sign. Revolting as they were physically, they obviously possessed a rudimentary intelligence, and possibly even practiced some crude tribal customs that would serve as at least a remote approach to civilized manners; it was a place to start, anyway, and he would just have to be gracious enough to try to ignore their inevitable lapses in proper behaviour. They couldn't help their degenerate state, after all, and at least they seemed to be making an effort to be accommodating.

They gestured for him to follow them, and led him through the forest to an open place by a cliff. Here a waterfall sent up a shimmering, rainbow spray. A tyrannosaur drank from the stream below the waterfall. Curiously, the two apes didn't try to avoid the notice of the monster, whose jaws dipped repeatedly into the water. As they drew closer, Harry noted that the mighty carnosaur wasn't actually *swallowing* the water. It seemed posed, tail pointed straight back, barrel-like body parallel to the ground. Only the head bobbed up and down mechanically, its eyes expressionless . . . It was touching the water with its snout, but it wasn't drinking.

As far as Harry was concerned, they were getting altogether too near to his gigantic ancestor now. The brute had not yet seen them, and Harry intended to keep it that way. He stopped and refused to go any farther.

His two grotesquely-ugly companions made throaty, staccato sounds,

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throwing back their heads and baring their white teeth. Harry couldn't decide whether they were undergoing some sort of seizure or expressing mirth. Perhaps they intended to eat him or—even worse!—sacrifice him to the tyrannosaur in some bizarre pagan rite. They stood underneath its tiny forelegs now, in the very shadow of the monster.

"I say, this could be extremely dangerous, you know," Harry said uneasily. "I don't like showing the white feather, and all that, but things really could get rather sticky if that brute should happen to notice you." Somehow, he felt duty bound to try to save these feckless creatures from themselves. Degenerate or not, they were, after all, more-or-less intelligent beings. "Please . . . it will gobble the both of you if you don't come away from there this very instant."

Of course the stupid apes didn't understand a word he was saying. Ignoring him, the male ape reached up and seized a tuft of mauve fur on the giant's underbelly.

Harry committed himself to his God, and waited for the great foot to come crashing down. Nothing happened. Instead of seeing the apes crushed or gobbled up, he watched in astonishment as a trapdoor opened in the tyrannosaur's belly.

It was a machine! A clockwork Mock-Dinosaur! It must be—it *had* to be—these creatures' equivalent of the chronokineticon! It had none of the chronokineticon's elegance, of course, but it had to be a crude, primitive time-machine of some sort. But what period could unwholesome creatures like these possibly have come from?

The female ape pulled a little stepladder down from inside the monster. With her clumsy fingers, she gestured for Harry to enter with her and her mate. Harry followed them in.

There was a small compartment within the tyrannosaur. In this cramped space, the unpleasant, musky odor of the intelligent simians, which had troubled Harry's nostrils before, became almost overpowering, but Harry tried to ignore it in the spirit of enlightened scientific inquiry. Two chairs faced a console with colored lights on its curved panel. Photographs of creatures of similar mien to his two companions decorated the walls. Miniature, bronze-coated shoes hung over the console, along with two black-dotted white cubes. Harry made a note of these objects, which seemed to serve no technical purpose. Were they *fetishes* of some kind? Magic? Could these beasts be so technologically advanced and yet so culturally primitive at the same time? Perhaps the Age of Enlightenment had not yet reached whatever strange backwater of the timeline they inhabited. They were only apes, after all—it would be a mistake to expect too much of them.

Suddenly the little one pounded herself on her ample chest and piped something that sounded like: "Hue-man!"

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Clever little creature! She was evidently trying to communicate with him, beginning quite logically by telling him her name, but before he could respond in kind, the entire time machine was rocked with terrific force. Harry was sent sprawling onto the floor. Hue-man and her hairy-lipped companion fell on top of him in a tangle of arms and legs. Even through his terror, Harry winced at the contact. By Godfrey, did they stink!

The time-machine was buffeted a second time, even more savagely. One of the walls buckled. A siren began to howl. The two hapless apes were gibbering in terror.

Harry lunged for the trapdoor, while the machine lurched like a ship on a storm-tossed sea. He managed to spring out through the opening just as the entire tyrannosaur frame tilted to one side and then went crashing to the ground.

Harry rolled end over end in the sawgrass, the sound of crunching metal loud in his earholes. He finally came to rest in a hollow, and crawled behind a rock to watch the disaster that was unfolding before his eyes.

An enormous, purple, polka-dotted Tyrannosaurus rex was rubbing itself against the hiked-up hind quarters of the toppled Mock-Dinosaur, apparently trying to mate with it. The monster didn't seem the least bit intimidated by the frightful shrilling of the siren, perhaps even finding it erotic, if its own lustful moanings in counterpoint were any indication. It made a particularly vigorous thrusting motion with its pelvis, tail lashing enthusiastically, and suddenly the entire time-machine collapsed under the brute's weight, ending the siren's wail for good. The tyrannosaur lost its balance and crashed to the ground on top of the collapsing framework, and then sprang back to its feet again. It seemed confused by the crumpling of its would-be mate, and perhaps by the abrupt silencing of the enticing siren. Scratching its head with a delicate forelimb, it looked around in puzzlement. It didn't see the female ape, who had jumped out of the ruined structure and hurriedly crawled into a clump of ferns. She shrank under their fronds until she was completely out of sight, while the tyrannosaur sorted through the wreckage with its claws. Suddenly, it hissed in triumph as it pulled the hairy-lipped male ape out of the rubble. The male ape screamed as daggerlike fangs closed on him, and he kept on screaming as the tyrannosaur slowly—almost contemplatively—chewed him. At last the tyrannosaur swallowed him, licked its chops, and emitted a small, delicate belch.

While the tyrannosaur rummaged through the ruins for more titbits, Harry crept even further behind his rock. Ancestor or no, that enormous carnivore would eat him too, given the chance. Would it find and devour the female ape as well? In spite of her loathsome appearance, he hoped

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not. However unprepossessing she was, it had somehow touched him that the poor creature had told him her name.

Finally, when the tyrannosaur could find no more meat in the twisted wreckage, it kicked spitefully at what was left of the time-machine and stalked off, steel crunching under its huge talons.

Harry stood, shaken but unhurt. He walked to the clump of ferns where Hue-man hid. "You can come out," he said, forgetting that she couldn't understand him. "It's quite safe now."

The tone of his voice seemed to reassure her a little. She crawled out, her once neatly-pressed uniform torn and dirty. Her eyes showed more white than ever, and—somewhat nauseatingly—clear, salty fluid ran from them to form pale tracks in the dirty smudges on her cheeks. Nevertheless, she appeared to be unharmed. She jumped up and staggered about, chattering in shock and horror. It was a particularly disgusting display of emotion, but Harry supposed he would have to put up with it until Hue-man calmed herself.

"There, there," he said stiffly, attempting to comfort the female simian. "The tyrannosaur is gone. Don't be frightened."

Hue-man dried her eyes at last, perhaps resigned to the fact that her mate and the time-machine were no more. She gazed sadly at the wreckage of the Mock-Dinosaur as Harry slid his watch fob out of its pocket and checked the time. He had been in the Cretaceous nearly two hours. After this disaster, perhaps he should tempt Fate no longer and expeditiously make his return to civilization . . . though what in the world could he do about Hue-man?

He would simply have to take her back with him when he returned to his own time. It was the only decent thing to do. Hideous as she was, she did possess a dim intelligence, and he couldn't just leave her stranded here, to be eaten by carnivorous dinosaurs. Of course, there was no way she would be able to fit into civilized society save as a monstrous freak, a curiosity. Perhaps Sir Brathwaite would be able to help her return to her own time. Even if he could not, surely life in the nineteenth century, even as a scientific curiosity, was preferable to being torn apart by wild beasts. At least she would be able to live out her normal span, perhaps in a zoological garden. . . .

Harry beckoned for Hue-man to follow him, and set out to return to the chronokineticon. They gingerly made their way back to the forest, watching out for carnivores all the while. Soon they came to the dark edge of the woods, and after a few minutes Harry found a notched tree. They followed the trail he had blazed through the jungle. A half-hour later they emerged into the blinding sunlight once again, and a few minutes after that Harry caught sight of the chronokineticon. From

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where they stood, it looked none the worse for wear. His throat pouch ballooned in relief.

As they drew nearer the aggregate of outsize cogs and wheels, Hue-man's expressions ran the gamut. At first she squinted at the chronokineticon, then her eyes widened to show the whites, and finally she made the same startling staccato sound she and her mate had once before produced, exposing her fangs once again. The sound was just as unpleasant as it had been the first time.

Hue-man climbed up onto the outsized bicycle with the aid of a ladder attached to the central wheel. She made the awful staccato, cackling noise again, convincing Harry that it did indeed express pleasure. Did she understand that he had come from *a future*, at the least. Hue-man must have come from a different one, a future where apes had somehow become ascendant . . . unlikely as that seemed.

She gaped at him as he began to gesticulate, trying to explain his intentions in sign language, although it seemed futile. Perhaps if he just spoke loudly and slowly enough. . . .

A heart-stopping roar cut him short. They both turned at the same time to see a theropod come leaping towards them. It wasn't as large as the tyrannosaur, but it looked just as fierce and hungry. It was bright green with magenta stripes. Harry recognized it as a daspletosaurus.

"By Godfrey, it's coming straight for us!" he cried.

And indeed it was. In another moment it would be on top of them. They would never be able to outdistance the brute on foot. But Harry did not allow himself to succumb to panic. He leaped onto the chronokineticon, slipped the chain off the smallest cog, and lifted the terrified Hue-man off the seat and onto the handlebars. Harry stood on the pedals. He heard Hue-man gasp as they went over the side of the chronokineticon's central wheel, dropping several feet to the ground. The impact was painfully jolting, and the bicycle bounced wildly, but Harry managed to keep it upright. As they coasted shakily over the edge of a long, downhill slope, the daspletosaurus crashed down onto the very spot where they'd been an instant before.

Harry pointed the wobbling front wheel downhill, and they quickly gathered speed as he pedaled for all he was worth. A furious hiss from behind them convinced him that the daspletosaurus wouldn't give up after only one try. He hoped the beast wouldn't destroy the chronokineticon in its rage.

The ground shook, causing Harry to lose control of the bicycle for a moment. Hue-man lurched forward, but somehow managed to hang on. The daspletosaurus' angry bellow sounded very close behind them now. Harry pedaled even harder, pushing himself to the limit.

Hue-man looked over her shoulder and shouted something.

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"What?" Harry cried.

She shouted a second time, some incomprehensible foreign gibberish, and then must have remembered that Harry couldn't understand what she was trying to tell him. She gesticulated wildly to the left as a shadow covered them.

Harry jerked the handlebars in that direction, nearly dislodging Hue-man. The daspletosaurus thundered to ground precisely where they would have been had they kept moving forward. The impact of the huge body hitting ground lifted the bicycle into the air.

Harry held the wheel straight, standing up on the pedals as they sailed aloft. They came down hard and bounced. The bicycle landed again, wobbling dangerously . . . and zigzagged off-course. The damnable thing was out of control!

The front tyre struck a dead log. Harry and Hue-man both were thrown over the handlebars, headlong into the murky waters of a swamp.

"Hue-man! Help! I can't swim!" Harry cried, as soon as he had fought his way to the surface of the muddy water once again. To drown, here in the Cretaceous, ages before his own birth! The horror of it!

Hue-man's white fangs showed through the slime caked on her face. Harry saw that she was standing up to her waist in the muck. He stood up, too, belatedly realizing that there was little danger of drowning. Embarrassed, he began to wade towards the bank, but Hue-man pulled at his forelimb, drawing him ever deeper into the morass.

The daspletosaurus boomed down onto the swamp bank, lashing its tail in frustration. It roared and hissed at them, stamping its clawed foot, but it didn't enter the bog.

"We must get back to the chronokineticon!" Harry shouted. "It's our only hope!"

Hue-man shook her head emphatically and tightened her grasp on Harry's forelimb, wading deeper into the foul-smelling swamp. The roaring and hissing of the daspletosaurus faded as they half-swam, half-walked to the far bank. Hue-man tried to climb out, but slipped in the mud and splashed back into the filthy water. Using his claws, Harry managed to clamber up onto solid ground. He held onto a magnolia branch, its sweet odor welcome after the fetid bog, and, after a moment's hesitation, stretched his tail into the water to pull Hue-man out. Dreadfully undignified, of course, but it couldn't be helped. Ignoring her gibbering, Harry took stock of himself, and discovered that he had lost his hatchet, hammer, pad and pencil. Only his watch remained, fastened as it was by a silver fob to his watch pocket.

Hue-man kept on gibbering and gesticulating wildly, frequently pointing to the north. Her babbling meant nothing, of course, but while she chattered Harry was inspired by the sudden thought that they could

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attempt a *different* route back to the chronokineticon, one that was not traversed by so many carnosaurs . . . or so he hoped. His watch still ticked, and as soon as he rubbed the filth from its crystal, he saw that it now read twelve minutes past three. There was plenty of time to circle around the swamp, instead of fording it. The chronokineticon was directly northwest from where they stood. If they proceeded north until they were out of sight of the daspletosaurus, and then turned due west, they should arrive in a little over two hours, Harry calculated. He gestured towards the north and they began their forced march back to the chronokineticon.

From time to time as they walked, Hue-man scratched the fur on the top of her head. Harry feared that she had lice, or worse, some unknown, prehistoric parasite. If such pests were ever to get under his feathers . . . Stoically, he tried to ignore the thought, as he was already trying manfully to disregard Hue-man's awful smell, which by this time had grown to a rankness of truly vile proportions. . . .

Harry's train of thought was interrupted as a creature as large as Hue-man—or himself—came abruptly out of the rushes. Harry and Hue-man ducked behind a sassafras tree and watched, Harry hoping that it wasn't a small carnosaur. By Jove, it wasn't! And when Harry saw what it *was*, he could hardly believe his luck.

It stood, birdlike, on two stout legs, and its long neck supported a tiny head. It was an ornithomimus, there could be no question of it. The prevalent theory of his day held that this was the primitive ancestor of modern sauriankind . . . though there was extant a crackpot theory that that honor belonged to the minute microvenator, a creature that had survived only by virtue of its insignificant size and timorousness. Harry subscribed to the conventional thesis, and the appearance of the ornithomimus reinforced his prejudice. Over the eons, the neck would shorten and thicken a bit to support the larger head, but his primitive ancestor was nonetheless magnificent for that. Cobalt blue and white feathers contrasted strikingly with a scarlet muzzle. It was an omnivore even in this early form, but—though it possessed an opposable thumb—its grip was not yet prehensile. It was larger than Harry, and undoubtedly much stronger. If it noticed them, there might be trouble. The ornithomimus disappeared behind some rhododendrons, and Harry sighed his relief.

Primitive though his ancestor was, Harry's chest swelled in pride nonetheless. Compared to the shuffling, stinking primate who stood next to him picking her nose, the ornithomimus was the grandest, most majestic creature in all of nature!

Soon the swamp was behind them, and they turned west until they were swallowed up in tall grass. At least they wouldn't be so easily seen on this plain as they had been when the daspletosaurus attacked them, Harry thought. The grass was taller than they were. The only drawback

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was that it made him sneeze. Even more distressing, he checked his watch and saw that nearly five hours had elapsed since he had arrived in the Cretaceous. Their overland journey was taking longer than he had anticipated . . . and he was not absolutely certain that they were headed in the right direction.

A peculiar-looking thunderhead glowered in the distance, but — curiously—the sun was still shining brightly on Harry and Hue-man. A shadow passed ominously overhead. Harry looked up to see a pteranodon circling, its crested head pointed at an odd-looking cloud as it banked. Ruefully, Harry remembered that he had lost his hatchet in the swamp. It would have been an effective weapon against the pteranodon, whose wingspan could not have been more than twenty feet. Grappling with it bare-handed was a different matter, of course. That foot-long beak could peck him to pieces.

What Harry had believed to be a cloud suddenly began to blur in and out of focus. There was an audible *pop*, and the cloud's outline became cleanly limned. Something that looked very much like a small, gabled house had appeared abruptly in mid-air!

The pteranodon screeched and soared away. The strange house hovered in mid-air for a second, then came crashing to earth. There were quite a few strange objects littering a nearby hillside, Harry noticed, the grass flattened under them, but the small gabled house was much closer than any of these others.

"Hello!" Harry shouted. "It must be another time-traveler!"

He ran towards the rubble of the house, Hue-man right behind him, just in time to see the first of its inhabitants emerge. They were bipeds, covered with grey fur and wearing bright plaid kilts. From their muzzles lolled long, pink tongues. They yipped with emotion as they helped each other out of the wreckage of their time machine—an entire pack of them.

"Good Lord—intelligent canines!" Harry said in wonderment. "Whatever shall we have next?"

As if in reply, a cagelike device appeared in mid-air and clattered to earth. Inside was an intricate series of treadmills and a number of dazed bipedal rodents wearing spectacles that reflected like mirrors.

"Rats! Sapient rats!" Harry gasped. "By Jove, it's beyond belief!" As they watched, the cage door opened and perhaps a dozen of the Rat-Men scurried out, their naked tails switching behind them. They scuttled past the dazed canines and made their way over the hilltop.

Harry approached the dog-creatures with every intention of politely lending a helping hand, but the nearest of them turned and snarled at him, baring its fangs. Harry and Hue-man kept their distance as the canines pulled the last of their people from the rubble, licking each other and yapping joyously.

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But what would the dogs do now that the present danger was past? Harry and Hue-man began to back away just as the pack turned towards them and set up a frightful din with their barking. At that moment, another fuzzy object swam into existence between Harry and the pack of dogs. A golden, sphinx-like device glided gracefully to the ground.

From the sphinx emerged a a bipedal feline wearing a jaunty black beret. It hissed at the dogs, its fur standing on end. The dogs growled at the cat-creature, standing their ground as it warily circled them.

"Good Heavens!" Harry cried. "Yet *another* time-travelling race!"

But how could he communicate with any of them when they all insisted on *fighting* with one another?

Yet another time-machine appeared. This one was a rather ramshackle, formless construction. From it emerged two bushy-tailed, masked mammals that, Harry speculated, might be descended from *Procyon lotor*, or raccoons. They wore no clothing but ascots.

"Extraordinary!" Harry exclaimed. "This must be a nexus, a place where all the time-lines are tangled together. We two came in just at the *fringes* of it, Hue-man!"

In short order, they observed the appearance of intelligent, time-travelling horses, cetaceans, pigs, snakes, gazelles, vultures, rabbits, weasels, wolverines, gerbils, and a bear wearing penny-loafers and a derby hat. These creatures emerged from dozens of time-machines of every size and shape, all of them pouring from the odd thunderhead above, which must have been the very heart of the Time Nexus. As Harry and Hue-man drew closer to it, they saw that the Nexus was a dark rent in an otherwise clear, blue sky, through which time-machines constantly dropped. They threaded their way through the milling throngs of dazed temponauts and climbed to the top of the hill. From that vantage, they saw thousands of time-machines, in various states of repair, littering the landscape in the valley just beyond. Swarming about them were thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of creatures, chittering, squawking, roaring and squeaking, for as far as the eye could see.

As the entire spectacle came into view, a sea-green globe bounced on the hilltop and rolled toward them. Harry studied the globe, amazed to see fishy beings peering from its aqueous depths through crafty, button eyes. Intelligent fish! Harry's mind reeled.

Then from the chaos at the foot of the hill, a repulsive creature emerged. Good Lord, it was a . . . a six-foot-tall cockroach! The insectile temponaut staggered about on its hind legs and held its shiny brown head between two forelimbs. A second cockroach stumbled after it, and then dozens more of the loathsome things.

"Now, I *must* say!" Harry cried, disgust finally overmastering wonderment. "This is simply too much! Abominable! Odious! Damnable!"

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These creatures were so offensive and vile as to make Hue-man look decidedly normal—even attractive—by comparison. Even Hue-man herself seemed staggered by the appearance of this latest batch of time-travellers, for she had turned pale and swayed slightly on her feet. And indeed, why not? Intelligent cockroaches! Hideous beyond belief! Even an ape could be expected to sicken at *this*.

The cockroaches gathered round, their antennae wildly waving. Would they attack? Their chitinous carapaces looked as solid as steel, and doubtless their mandibles could tear saurian flesh as easily as paper. They moved closer, and Hue-man began to shriek horribly.

Just when Harry was certain that he was about to die, yet another time-machine popped onto the scene, an accordionlike attachment at its base to absorb the shock of falling. This one looked something like a sleigh, with an enormous, engraved disc spinning in the rear. Well-polished brass gleamed, and the time-traveller's seat was upholstered in plush, red velvet.

The time-traveller himself was attired in a vest, tie, and smoking jacket. A pipe was clenched between his teeth, accentuating the determined cast of his jaw. So civilized was his demeanor—so, so . . . *saurian*—that it was difficult to believe he was of the same race as Hue-man . . . and yet he was indeed a simian!

The newcomer looked around him, and his eyes widened to show the whites, in a familiar manner, as he saw Hue-man and the giant cockroaches. His eyes narrowed again to a steely grey glint. Apparently perceiving a threat to a female of his species, he set his pipe down on a brass panel before him, leaped out of his time-machine, and swung a meaty fist at the nearest cockroach.

The poor creature landed on its back, legs churning furiously. Before the enraged simian could strike it again, two of the other cockroaches turned their companion over, and then every last one of the insectile horrors scuttled away on all sixes, seeking shelter in the very mob from whence they had so recently escaped. The bullying ape spat into his palms and turned towards Harry. His jaw was set, and his grey eyes gleamed like swordblades.

Shrinking before him, Harry commended his soul to heaven as the bulky simian raised a mighty fist high to strike him down . . .

Harry's throat pouch ballooned in fear. What was he to do? He grasped Hue-man's wrist and pushed her towards the male ape.

"Take this flea-bitten creature for your mate!" he screamed. "She is quite uncivilized, but not unintelligent, for an ape. Perhaps *you*, old chap, could even school her in proper manners, eh what? Go on, man! Take her!"

The male ape hesitated as Hue-man clung to him. She gibbered in

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their language for a moment and then dismissed Harry with a spiteful wave of her hand. They both bared their teeth and cackled in their staccato manner. Finally, Hue-man and the male, who had indeed become her new mate, clambered into his time-machine. The male lit his pipe, puffed it contemplatively for a moment, and then pulled a bejeweled lever. The metal wheel clanked and whirred as it began to turn. The simian time-machine and its occupants became blurry.

"Ta-ta, old girl!" Harry shouted after Hue-man, greatly relieved. "It really *is* better this way, you know. You wouldn't have fit at all well into society back where I come from. You'll be much happier among your own kind." His inner ear reacted uncomfortably to the time displacement effect as the two apes vanished. He stood staring at the spot where he had last seen Hue-man, finding that, oddly enough, he almost missed her . . . until a falling device full of intelligent lobsters nearly struck him down. He had better get away from this torrent of time-machines and return to the chronokineticon, posthaste. Consulting his watch, he saw that only thirty-three minutes remained before the Law of Forward Time Conversion took effect. Could he make it back in time? Even if he reached the bicycle, he still had to attach it to the chronokineticon. And, even if the chronokineticon remained undamaged, it was unlikely that the bicycle was all right. There was a very good chance that he was doomed to spend the rest of his life in the Cretaceous.

Harry began to run. The curious but cowardly cockroaches followed him for a while, but as he approached the yapping Dog-Men, those loathsome vermin became frightened and scurried away once again. He stole one last glance at the incredible sight of a myriad of time-machines and temponauts, and then he was on his way. Only twenty-four minutes remained!

Harry guessed that he must travel due west to find the chronokineticon, if his calculations about the proximate location of the Time Nexus were correct. He ran up one hill and down another, wheezing, feeling the precious minutes slipping away, searching desperately for some sign of the bicycle or the chronokineticon.

He had only fourteen minutes left when the landscape began to take on a familiar cast. Yes, there was the forest in which he had first encountered Hue-man and her mate, and just to the south of the forest was the swamp where he had been forced to abandon the damaged bicycle. Harry quickly pulled his watch fob out and checked the time. Nine minutes to six!

He dashed frantically across the plain, straining his eyes to find the bicycle. If he didn't find it *very* soon, he would be condemned to a short and nasty lifespan in the Mesozoic. The seconds ticked away like the pounding of his pulse. Now there were less than *five* minutes left. . . .

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There it was! The gleaming, black bicycle was easily visible in the yellow grass. Harry sprinted toward it, his tail up high behind him. He was not more than fifty feet from it when a blood-curdling yowl split the air. He glanced behind him and saw a pack of brightly plumed deinonychuses bounding towards him, screeching horribly as they came. Harry's heart lurched in terror.

The leader was near enough for Harry to make out the terrible claws on its hind legs. Though the deinonychuses were no larger than himself, they were extremely fierce—and there were so *many* of them!

Harry could never outrun them. His only chance was the bicycle. He doubted that it was still serviceable, but he made for it as quickly as he could.

As he ran, he whipped out the watch. Less than two minutes remained!

He despaired as he drew closer to the bicycle and saw that its tyres were so badly bent that it could not possibly be ridden. The deinonychuses were closing in on him. Their roaring filled his earholes as he reached the bicycle.

At that moment an astonishing thing happened. The bicycle suddenly righted itself and flew straight up into the air. It bounced back down to the ground and then up again, the twisted metal straightening itself a bit on each bounce.

The bicycle bounced one last time, and was completely restored as it began to pedal backwards. Harry ran towards it, the wild pack howling right behind him.

The Law of Forward Time Conversion was taking effect!

Harry scurried pell-mell across the plain, chasing the bicycle, until he caught sight of the chronokineticon; it rested in the bed of wildflowers exactly as he had left it. His heart swelled with hope as he saw that it was unharmed.

A dinosaur the size of a chicken, a microvenator, who had been dining on butterflies, blinked as the riderless bicycle came pedalling backwards towards it. It squawked and scurried up onto what it no doubt deemed the safest place in sight—the chronokineticon.

In a trice, the bicycle leapt up onto the main wheel alongside the tiny creature. It took its place and its chain snaked over the chronokineticon's smallest cog. The huge mechanism was already whirling, bound for the nineteenth century! Harry glanced over his shoulder and saw slavering jaws about to close on his tail! He ducked aside as the deinonychus' fangs snapped shut, catching a whiff of fetid breath. The carnosaur stumbled, its forward motion arrested just enough for Harry to outdistance it the last few paces to the time-machine. It was now or never!

Harry leapt towards the bicycle, three pair of clacking jaws barely missing him. He fell short, landing on the ladder, and scrambled des-

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perately towards the seat. As hungry jaws snapped around him, the chicken-sized microvenator scurried up over his body and head. The ladder, never meant to carry weight under the tremendous force of the spinning main wheel, began to buckle and fall back towards the pack of deinonychuses. Harry felt their hot breath on his tail and backside as he jumped. The deinonychuses screeched and ground their razor teeth as he clambered up onto the seat. In a moment the savage beasts had vanished.

The light flickered and dimmed as the sun passed overhead repeatedly. Harry pedaled backwards. Fortunately, there was less resistance moving forward in time than moving in reverse. The glaciers rushed over him, retreated, rushed back. . . . The mountains became less craggy, and he caught a fleeting glimpse of rude, neolithic huts in the distance. The huts became first a village, then a town, and at last a city.

Harry neared his own beloved nineteenth century. The sun arced from east to west a little slower now. The university spires appeared. Harry's claws gripped the handlebars tightly. He was almost home! The flag-bedecked pavilion sprang up. The crowd came into view next, moving comically fast—and there was Sir Brathwaite!

The brilliant scientist sat on his shooting stool, drinking tea, just as he had been when Harry last saw him. With an enormous clunking noise, the chronokineticon came to an abrupt, wrenching halt. Momentum tossed Harry off headlong into the crowd, the pith helmet flying off his head.

As the terrified Harry landed in their midst, his fall broken by the bodies of several indignant gentlesaurians, everyone gasped—or very nearly everyone. Sir Brathwaite had not seen Harry hurled into the crowd. His snout had been stuck in a teacup when the chronokineticon appeared, and he had missed everything. Now he perceived that the cumbersome time-machine had returned—and more than returned: it was partially embedded in the ground, a result of geologic activity over the eons. Just as the ground was low in the Cretaceous, so was it commensurately high in the nineteenth century. It was this that had stopped the machine's motion and hurled Harry forward.

Sir Brathwaite waved his stick at the chronokineticon. Resting upon its seat was Harry's helmet.

"Poor, brave Harry!" said the grey-feathered scientist. "All that remains of him is his pith helmet!"

Reverently, Sir Brathwaite lifted the edge of the helmet with his stick. Underneath it, perched on the seat, crouched the tiny dinosaur that had fled to the chronokineticon for fear of the deinonychus pack!

"Oh, what a tragedy!" Sir Brathwaite said, as the pith helmet fell to the main wheel and rolled to a stop. "The poor devil has regressed to a

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state of prehistory . . . and not even to an ornithomimus, at that." Sir Brathwaite's throat sac distended sadly. "I say, Harry lad, do you know me? Poor, dear, brave boy!"

The creature blinked at him.

"This stout fellow has made the ultimate sacrifice for science and empire . . . but at least he has proved my theory that the modern saurian is descended from the crafty microvenator!"

"*Your* theory, Sir Brathwaite?" Harry slowly raised his aching body from the mud and stood. "I do not recall you even subscribing to that theory, let alone inventing it."

Sir Brathwaite stared in dismay as Harry limped towards him. For a moment he looked angry at Harry's inopportunely timed appearance, but quickly recovered his composure. "Thank God you're alive," Sir Brathwaite gushed, coming forward to pump Harry's hand. "I knew you'd survive, old thing. All it takes is pluck, and you've always had plenty of that!"

While Harry was still blinking in astonishment at Sir Brathwaite's utter shamelessness, Sir Brathwaite turned to the crowd. "Three cheers for Harry Quince-Pierpont Fotheringay!" he shouted. "Hip, hip—"

"Hooray!" the audience roared.

"Hip, hip—"

"Hooray!"

"Hip, hip—"

"Hooray!

Harry attempted to speak, but the roar of the crowd drowned out his hoarse voice. In spite of his momentary annoyance with Sir Brathwaite, he was deeply touched.

At last the din died down, and Sir Brathwaite commanded his attention once again. "My boy, you have returned from the Cretaceous, with this creature as evidence of your marvelous journey through time. A knighthood shall soon be yours, no doubt. But now, tell us what it was like. Can you describe the awesome vistas of the prehistoric world for us?"

Harry's happiness at his hero's reception quickly faded at the thought of the intelligent apes he had encountered in the past, to say nothing of the intelligent dogs, whales, and cockroaches. He looked around at the throng of gentlesaurians that surrounded him—the great ladies peering through their lorgnettes at him, the gentlemen leaning forward avidly, resting on canes and furled umbrellas—and felt his throat pouch swell with emotion. Here was the very flower of nineteenth century civilization, itself the pinnacle and summation of all previous history. How serene they were, how untroubled, how effortlessly refined—unchallenged rulers of an Empire upon which the sun never set, masters of all they surveyed, the chosen of God, made in His image, to whom He had given

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Dominion over all the beasts of the earth . . . How could he tell them the truth? How could he tell them they were not alone, not unique? How could he shatter their complacency by telling them of all the other creatures who doubtless believed that they, too, were Lords of Creation . . . loathsome, unwholesome creatures! He shivered in horror and disgust at the very thought of them. How *could* he tell these cultivated gentlesaurians that it seemed to be only the merest chance—the whim of the universe—that it was *they* who had achieved the summit, and not gerbils, or weasels, or raccoons, or apes?

"No, Sir Brathwaite," he said, a catch in his voice, his jaw firming in resolution. "No, for there are some things sauriankind was not meant to know . . ." ●

ENCASED IN THE AMBER OF PROBABILITIES

1.
The sails are pitted in fine lacework,
shredded like mylar snow
spinning out behind in spiral clouds.

2.
Hopes are as rich as vacuum,
but my fighting chances
are sparse as interstellar dust.

3.
Starwrecked I wait, sweating in
the kiln of my EVA suit, for the sun
to fire my flesh and bake my bones.

4.
A winter field of constellations
spins about my head
in battle array; I plot rebirth.

—Robert Frazier

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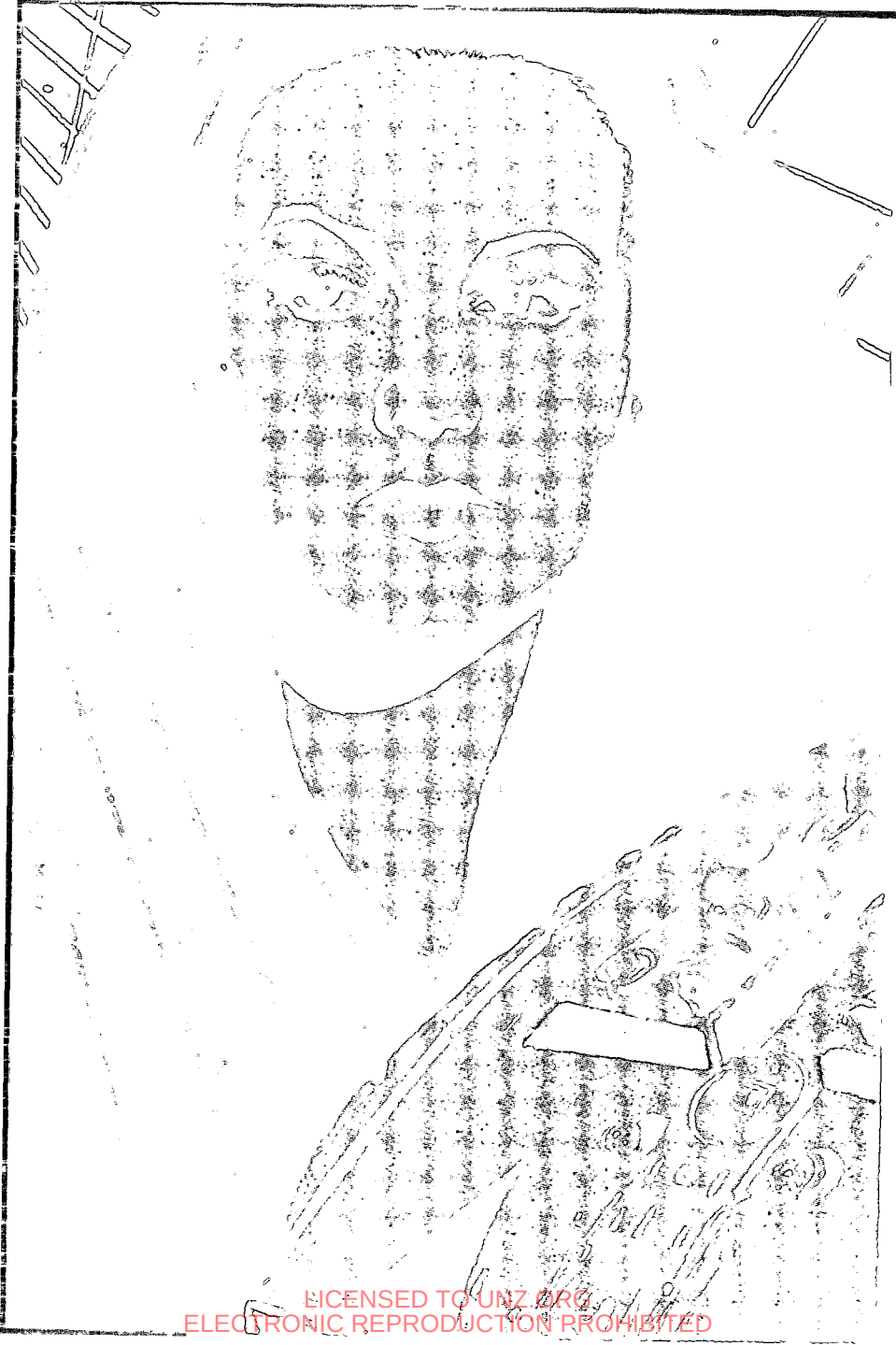

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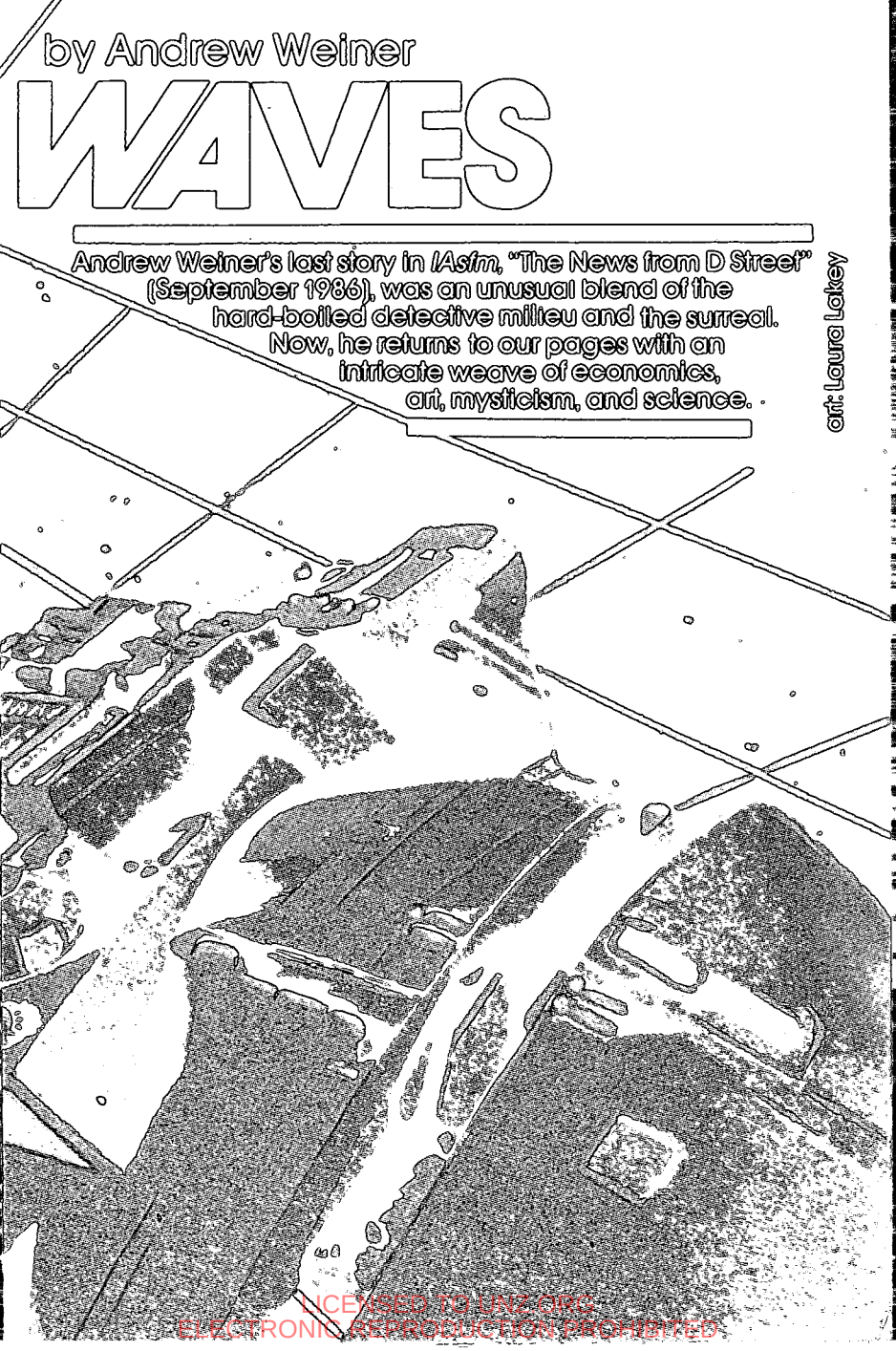
by Andrew Weiner

WAVES

Andrew Weiner's last story in *IAsfm*, "The News from D Street" (September 1986), was an unusual blend of the hard-boiled detective milieu and the surreal. Now, he returns to our pages with an intricate weave of economics, art, mysticism, and science.

art: Laura Lakey



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It was a scorching early summer afternoon, and I had not had a customer in hours. I was sitting at my terminal in the back room of my store, squeezed in between stacks of dusty books and tattered magazines, making notes for my next synthvid.

I wanted to try a western, after mining the *noir* to the point of exhaustion, and was thinking about a Serge Leone version of *The Searchers*, perhaps with Clint Eastwood in the John Wayne role. But I had worked with Eastwood before, and I knew that he didn't synth very well; there was a woodenness that I couldn't quite shake, even with my brand-new Vostok mixing deck.

Perhaps Burt Lancaster, then, or Robert Mitchum. The possibilities, as always, were endless, and I was getting no closer to narrowing them down.

It was six months since I had completed my last synth, the Dick Powell cut of *The Big Sleep*, in itself little more than a footnote to my earlier and more successful Bogart/Hawkes *Murder My Sweet*, although favorably reviewed in the synth guides. I would have liked to believe that my audience was clamoring for more, but my most recent royalties statement from CableNet told me that *Sleep* had so far been accessed by less than two hundred users, hardly enough to keep me in blank tape. There was a cult for everything these days, or so they said, but I would have preferred a slightly larger one. Perhaps I was getting a little too esoteric, even for the remarkably esoteric synthvid audience.

A customer would have been a pleasant distraction, but everyone was down at the beach. I decided that I might as well join them. I was heading for the door when the red light began to flash insistently on my terminal, indicating priority email. It was unlikely that anyone in Bayville would send me a priority message. There was very little that happened here that could not be discussed tomorrow, or in the middle of next week.

I thought about ignoring the message, but I knew it would still be flashing when I returned. So I returned to the terminal and punched in an acknowledgment. The message came up. I was to call Wayne Houghton in Washington.

Houghton had been one of my last, and best, graduate students, an absolute whiz with an econometric model. Like all of us, he had gone through some rough times after they shut down the universities. But a few years ago, with economists returning at least fractionally into favor, he had won a modestly important position in the Treasury. He had since thrown a number of offers of consulting work in my direction, offers I usually refused.

Just the previous summer, it was true, I had sweated out two months of stifling heat in the capital, crunching out the data that showed our rulers, once again, that the situation remained intractable. But I had

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done that only to pay for the Vostok. Otherwise, I preferred to stay home and run my store and make my synths. It was a lot more fun than being a consultant, and I could get by comfortably enough on my dole coupons.

Almost everyone in Bayville collected coupons from one government agency or another, most from the National Arts Administration, since this was the sort of place that outsiders would call an artists' colony. Small presses whirred in the night, poems appeared on billboards overlooking the beach, a puppet troupe enacted the history of the world in the town square, dolphins danced in the ocean spray to the rhythms of cetacean engineers. It was all part of what some over-excited government flack had dubbed "The Great American Renaissance."

It was as if all of us had agreed to take a few years off from the real business of life, although in fact there had been nothing voluntary about it. Initially, most of us had accepted the situation with considerable reluctance. After devoting years of effort to developing a particular career, it naturally came as a shock to find that career abruptly terminated, with no real hope of it ever being resumed. The shock was no less painful for the fact that it was an almost universal experience.

In time, though, given food on your table, a terminal on your desk, and a CableNet link, you can get used to anything. After a while, you could get through whole days without ever remembering that you once had something called a job.

I was more fortunate than most, clipping coupons not only from the NAA, which supported my work in synths, but also from the Small Business Administration, in my capacity as a used bookstore proprietor. My store never came remotely close to breaking even, but it was part of the town's tax base, and it provided employment, if only to me, and I was perfectly happy to keep it running as long as the SBA wanted me to.

This was how we all lived in Bayville, during the Pause, and it was not a bad life. Looking back on it now, I believe that it was the happiest period of my life.

I directed my terminal to place the call, and soon found myself looking at Wayne's friendly, open face.

"What's up, Wayne?" I asked.

"We think it may be turning around," he said, and his normally flat midwestern accent betrayed at least a hint of excitement. "We're getting some real interesting numbers. We've got sharp upturns in a whole bunch of leading indicators—construction, commodity prices, consumer attitudes, even farm machinery—and they seem to be collating with the long cycle data. It may be too soon to say for sure, but this time I think it really may be it."

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"That's nice," I said.

I was not exactly on the edge of my seat. I had been hearing such rumors of recovery for too many years. Besides, I was keen to get to the beach.

"I'd like you to come out and take a look," Wayne said. "I've booked you on a flight tonight out of Boston."

"I can't," I said. "I'm working on a synth."

"A synth?" Wayne echoed. "Oh yeah, that's your hobby, right? I've been meaning to screen those tapes you . . ."

"Wrong word, Wayne," I said. "We don't call it a hobby. A hobby is something you do in your spare time. We've got nothing but spare time here, so we call it art. And the NAA usually agrees."

"Sorry," Wayne said, automatically. "Anyway, I'm not asking you to give up your synth, just to put it aside for a few days."

"You don't need me," I said. "You can run the models as well as I ever could, probably better."

"We'd like your input," Wayne said. "We don't want to call it wrong again."

"No one will believe you even if you call it right," I said.

"Every cycle ends sometime," Wayne said.

He was quoting what I had told him and the rest of my students, so many years before, in our final class. I was no longer sure I believed that myself. Or perhaps I no longer wanted it to be true.

"Sometime," I agreed.

"Let me download the data to your terminal," Wayne said. "You can look at it now and get back to me on it."

"All right," I agreed, reluctantly. "I'll look at it. But not today. I'm on my way to the beach, and there's a big party tonight."

Wayne gave me an uncomprehending look. He had already forgotten how it was to live this way.

A few years ago, I knew, Wayne had been happy enough developing his art as a sonic sculptor in a small Vermont town. But now that he had become one of the few members of our society to hold a real, honest-to-god full-time job he had slipped back to an earlier way of being: time-urgent, driven, involved. It was a little frightening, actually.

"You must meet our star guest," Tom Duke said, gripping my arm and steering me away from the bar, where I had been consuming generous quantities of his best single-malt scotch and talking about the Russian rocket to Mars with a few other serious drinkers.

"Think of the raw material they could bring back," Jim Atkins had said. "Lichen, maybe. Even micro-organisms. Once we get in there and splice, we could get some terrific stuff."

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Jim owned the local GeneArts & Crafts supply store, and dabbled a little in vegetable housewares himself, bioluminescent mushroom table lamps and giant zucchini couches. Biotechnology, like computer technology, was continuing to make great strides. Although both created far more unemployment than employment, at least they gave the rest of us something to play with.

"I thought you did your best work in zucchini," said Lizzie Palmer, our local fire chief, who also ran a small press specializing in feminist mystery novels. "Anyway, there are no lichen on Mars. Not even micro-organisms that we know of."

Then Phil Conway, our local cultural commissar, head of the Bayville NAA office, had broken in to tell a string of little green Communist jokes. Phil was a bit of a bore, but his position made him one of the most important people in Bayville, so we had to tolerate him and his high opinion of himself. Portly and heavily bearded, he still looked like the poetry lecturer and poet he had been before he became a bureaucrat. He had made something of a name for himself back then, as one of the first to work with the new poetry machines. I had not much cared for the little of his poetry I had read, finding it somewhat, well, mechanical.

"And so the cosmonaut says, take me to your Central Committee . . ."

Russian jokes were big in Bayville that summer. Everyone liked to make fun of the Russians. They made people nervous with all their hustling and bustling about. They reminded us of *us*, somehow, the way we had once been. The Russians had not so much escaped the Pause as ignored it, mounting ever more gargantuan schemes.

The forthcoming landing on Mars was the latest and biggest insult in this vein. It was also one of the few exciting things to happen in the world outside our little town in years, or one of the few we chose to pay any attention to.

"Maybe later . . ." I started to tell Tom, but he was already propelling me across the room. We came to a halt at the fringe of a group of perhaps a dozen people, clustered around a tall woman with black liquid eyes. The crowds parted for our host, and I was ushered into her presence.

She was wearing a low-cut evening gown, black spangled with tiny mirrors, and a crimson-red belt with a silver buckle resembling an intricate wiring diagram. Around her neck hung the largest moonstone I had ever seen. Her long black hair flowed over her bare shoulders like a cape, framing a face made-up to emphasize its paleness. I thought she was probably somewhere in her thirties, although she could have been ten years younger or older. Her face was somehow familiar, but I could not immediately place it.

The fact that she was new in town guaranteed her at least a certain

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curiosity value. But the intensity of the attention surrounding her spoke more of worship than mere curiosity.

It was not so much a matter of how she looked, although her looks were striking enough. It was her very presence in the room. She seemed in some way not to belong there in Tom Duke's living room at all, among us ordinary people. Somehow she made us feel awkward and shambling and graceless. She might as well have come from some other planet, and in a sense perhaps she did.

"Ken," Tom said. "This is Marianne Reiss. The singer."

"Yes, of course," I said.

I do not follow music closely, but I had heard of Marianne Reiss. I realized, in fact, that I had seen her picture on the cover of *CableNet Digest* only a few months before. I had only skimmed the article, but I remembered that she was an art singer, favored by the critics if not yet by any mass audience.

"Marianne is a collector," Tom told me. "Marianne, this is Ken Vale. He runs the bookstore out on Bayview Road."

"What do you collect?" I asked.

"Different things," she said. "Mainly the 1950s. Household ornaments, old radio sets, decorating magazines, that sort of thing."

"You'll have to check out Ken's store," Tom told her. "He has some fabulous stuff."

"Just a few odds and ends," I said.

Actually, Tom had not set foot in my store in years. Normally, in fact, we were barely on speaking terms. But he was generally acknowledged to throw the best parties in town, in this big rambling place of his overlooking the beach. Having no discernible artistic inclination, this was his main contribution to the life of the community.

Once a top marketing executive for a Fortune 500 company, Tom had read the writing on the wall early on, stocking up what had once been his vacation home with guns and canned food and well-aged scotch. As it had turned out, the guns and the canned food had proved unnecessary. But the scotch had certainly come in handy, with all of us here on what seemed like a perpetual vacation.

Almost painfully energetic, Tom refused to accept the fate to which the rest of us had become resigned. Despite the continuing disarray of the nation's surviving corporations, he still nurtured dreams of a comeback. On Sundays you would see him sitting by the harbor, leafing through the painfully thin Careers section of the New York *Times*. At other times he would be seized by fits of entrepreneurial vigor, stopping you on the street to solicit your opinion. "Parking meters that write out a ticket and slap it on the car when the money runs out," he would say. "What do you think?" Or, "Biosynth elephant skin vests. It can't miss."

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Now Tom was applying his energies to amusing his guest, and I was the amusement of the moment.

"You know," he was saying, "this man should have won a Nobel Prize."

"In literature?" she asked.

"Political economics," he said. "He's the man who predicted the Pause."

"Many predicted the Pause," I told her, "not least Kondratieff. I merely updated and elaborated upon the work of others, and made a few specific predictions."

I had in fact once earned a minor and temporary notoriety as "the man who predicted the collapse." The presses had hardly ceased rolling on my slim academic volume on long wave economic forecasting before the banks began to tumble, one by one. Good, or bad, timing propelled me into the spotlight, with the journalists dwelling upon the cheap irony of my own unemployment until they tired of the game, or were terminated themselves as advertising revenues fell through the floor.

But whatever I had predicted, I had never called it a "Pause." That term had entered the language only quite recently. In retrospect, the very fact that we had begun to call it the Pause, that long hiatus between the breakdown of the old economy and the emergence of the new, showed that it was finally approaching its end. For much of the preceding decade, we had had no particular name for it; it was only the way things were. Certainly we had not thought of it as a Pause, for that very term implied an ending, and no ending had appeared in sight.

It was the government, no doubt, that had introduced the term into circulation, as part of their never-ending attempts to cheer us all into economic recovery. The question, they had been telling us for years, was only one of confidence. We had only to glimpse the end in order to grasp it. Administration upon administration had fallen back upon this shamanistic approach, lacking any more viable alternative.

In a sense they were perfectly correct, but there were long waves at work here as in everything else. Sooner or later one government or another would be lucky enough to catch and ride them.

It turned out, as it happened, to be sooner rather than later. But that night, as Wayne's data lay undigested on my terminal, there was nothing to tell us as much. Nothing except perhaps an unusual hilarity in the air, a faint tingling of a new electricity which might finally disturb our agreeable lassitude. At the time, we thought it was the Russian rocket that excited us—that, or perhaps Marianne Reiss.

"Ken Vale," Marianne said. "You make synthvids, don't you? I think I accessed one of yours last weekend, the new one . . ."

"The Dick Powell *Big Sleep*?"

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She shook her head. "I don't know that one. I mean the one about the whale. With the Bach-Pink Floyd collaboration on the soundtrack."

"The Cimino *Moby-Dick*," I said.

It was far from being a recent vid. I had synthed that one two years ago, while I was still working on my old Maxwell 1024. *Moby-Dick* had its moments, particularly the scene of the whalers' Thanksgiving dinner, but these days, with my much more powerful Vostok rig, my work was sharper and, I thought, conceptually richer.

The Russians were doing great things in synth decks these days, much as in Mars rockets. It was a standing joke that the ongoing Mars trip, shown to us regularly in somber Russian technicolor, was itself a synth, Kubrick out of Lem, perhaps, or Tarkowsky out of Clarke.

I could have wished for her to have seen my latest work, but I was flattered that she had seen any of it at all.

"Are you working on anything now?" she asked me, so standard a question at parties like this one that she might as well have been a long-time Bayville resident.

"I'm still researching," I said. "I've been watching a lot of Leone, but I haven't quite figured out how to deal with the material."

But no one really wanted to talk synths, and the focus switched back to Marianne, if in fact it had ever left her. Then Tom swept her off to see his ocean view and the group broke up and I drifted back to the bar, where Phil Conway was still telling Martian jokes.

I would like to have talked to her longer. The very banality of our conversation had only intrigued me further. There was an elusive quality about her, beneath that opaque surface, that I would have liked to pursue. But I knew I would see her again soon enough, possibly at a party much like this one. Bayville was a small town, and there were many parties. We had a lot of parties during the Pause; we would throw one for the slightest pretext, or for none at all. The Pause, in a sense, was one never-ending party.

Dora Duncan, who had once been a top corporate lawyer but these days worked in newfoods and lived, on and off, with Tom Duke, brought round a tray of singing canapés. They were singing a Wagner aria. We made the expected fuss, although like many of her creations I found them rather silly, literally tasteless, and off-key besides. But I chewed away dutifully and murmured polite remarks.

Dora lingered at my side. I thought she was seeking further compliments, but she had something else on her mind.

"I see you had an audience with the ice queen," she said.

Now that she mentioned it, I realized that I *had* felt a definite although not unpleasant chilliness about Tom's guest.

"Actually, I thought she was rather charming."

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"If you like that sort of thing," Dora said.

"What sort of thing?"

"The dark lady number," Dora said. "You know. Mystery wrapped in enigma."

"Everyone loves a mystery," I said.

"Except," Dora said, "that she's a sphinx without a riddle."

"That's quite good," I said. "Did you make that up?"

"No," she said. "I think it was Disraeli. Or maybe someone said that about Disraeli."

"Actually," cut in Phil Conway, who had been listening to this exchange, "she is a bit of a riddle. She was an astronomer, you know, quite a successful one. She was even an astronaut, she went up on one of the OrbLab missions."

"You seem to have made quite a study of her."

"It's all in her NAA file," Phil said. "All that and more. After she quit astronomy she went back to school to study neurology, but they closed the program down before she finished her thesis."

"And now she's a singer," I said. "Just your standard career switch."

"Actually," Phil said, "the singing came later. She wrote poetry first. And she also worked in the visual arts, in holography. What you might call a Renaissance woman."

"Or a dilettante," Dora said. "Looking for new ways to amuse herself."

"Careful," I said. "I'm not sure any of us should talk about dilettantism. What kind of singer is she, anyway?"

"I accessed her latest tape this afternoon," Dora said.

"And?"

Dora shrugged. "If you like that sort of thing . . ." she said, once again, and again, obviously, she didn't. "It's all whales groaning and people moaning and electronics beeping away."

As her canapés testified, Dora was a classicist when it came to music.

"And kind of depressing. Downbeat, you know. Doomy. And cold, very cold."

"Sounds interesting," I said.

"You can hear for yourself. She's singing at the Bayville Hotel all week."

Although Wayne's data awaited me on my terminal when I woke up the next morning—it was a good enough party that I rose barely before noon—I was playing checkers in the back room when I heard a customer come in.

I was playing checkers because I was not in the mood to analyze econometric wave forms, and because I had long ago lost the patience for chess. It was a kid's game, but I enjoyed the constriction of options, the

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frantic pace of events. In many ways, the Pause was a kind of second childhood for all of us.

I was playing checkers that afternoon with Lily Marsden, who ran the leather crafts store down the block. Together we were among the pillars of the Bayville Chamber of Commerce, such as it was. We were also involved in a casual if long-standing relationship.

Lily was sitting facing the door of the shop.

"Customer," she said.

"In a moment," I said, plotting to set up a triple jump.

"She's gorgeous," Lily said, "sort of."

I turned and saw Marianne Reiss framed in the doorway, peering into my store. I went out to greet her.

"I just found the most wonderful old display monitor down by the harbor," she told me. "A black-and-white Philco from the late 1950s, with built in tuner, one-way of course. It looks like some sort of space helmet. And the picture tube comes out on the end of a long cable. He had it hooked up to an old Betamax playing a video of some old cowboy show."

She had obviously come from Max Nussbaum's antique store, the only real antique store in Bayville. Max had all the usual dull old country pine furniture, but he specialized in antique video. In addition to some splendid hardware, he had a vast catalogue of tapes you couldn't even access through CableNet, lost or banned episodes of forgotten TV shows.

I was teaching him how to synth new ones, on my old Maxwell deck. Like most beginners he had gone through all the obvious tricks first, like putting yourself and your friends into the mix and running them through various predictable scenarios—synth technology had originally been developed for the home porno business—but under my guidance he was now taking a more professional approach. He was coming along nicely on a new episode of "Night Gallery," early Spielberg directing early King.

"Probably 'Wagon Train,' " I told her. "Max loves 'Wagon Train.' I know the set you mean. It's one of his best. I'm surprised he would part with it."

She was looking at the stacks of old magazines piled on one of the display tables. It occurred to me that she might actually want to buy something.

"Were you looking for anything in particular?" I asked.

"Oh, I'd just like to browse."

"I'll be in back," I said. "Just call if you need me."

I settled back at the checkers board.

"She's the singer, isn't she?" Lily asked. "The one who was over at Tom Duke's last night. Lizzy told me about her."

"It was quite a party," I said. "You should have come."

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"I had a headache."

Lily had a permanent headache as far as Tom Duke was concerned.

"She's a collector," I said. "Fifties stuff."

"I hear that's not *all* she collects."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Tom Duke," she said.

"What about him?"

"I hear she and Tom went for a long walk on the beach last night. And they didn't come back until after everyone had gone."

"Could be," I said. "But Tom Duke?"

"Some people find Tom Duke attractive," Lily said. "Why, are you jealous of Tom?"

"That's an interesting thought."

"Maybe she'll collect you, too."

"That might be nice," I said.

"You know what they say about collectors, don't you?"

"That their toilet training got messed up?"

"That they're trying to fill the emptiness inside. Holding on to inanimate objects as a kind of security blanket."

"I don't know if you could call Tom Duke an inanimate object," I said. "It could be argued, I suppose. Anyway, what about *your* toys?"

Lily had a sizeable collection of old Chinese wind-up toys.

"That's different," she said. "I don't collect them. I play with them."

"Of course," I said. "Silly of me."

"Her voice sounds like money," she said.

Lily had once taught American Literature at Boston University, and didn't let you forget it.

"Fitzgerald," I said. "Never done very well, although the Alan Ladd was the best of a bad lot. Maybe I should give Bogdanovich a shot at it."

"With Gregory Peck," Lily offered. Lily adored Gregory Peck.

"She just bought an old monitor from Max," I said, pursuing her earlier line of thought. "One of his best. It would probably take a lot of coupons to buy that set."

"Or cash," Lily said. "Is she very successful as a singer?"

"I haven't seen her royalty statements," I said. "But I would doubt we're talking about a lot of money."

"Old money, then," Lily said.

"Could be," I agreed.

These days old money usually meant gold money, safely buried before the government halted trading. There were still a few rich people around, although we rarely saw them in Bayville.

"Mr. Vale?"

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I went back into the store. She had settled on some 1950s decorating magazines, not terribly rare but in good condition.

"I like your store, Mr. Vale," she told me.

"Ken," I said. "Are you planning to stay in Bayville for a while?"

"I'm singing at the Bayville Hotel all week," she said. "After that I may move on. Or I may stay on a while. I have no pressing engagements."

"I was planning on coming to hear you," I said.

"Why don't you come down tonight?" she said. "We're having an opening night party."

It was Max Nussbaum who told me about Marianne's curious sideline. I bumped into him down at the bank, where I was cashing a dole coupon.

"I hear you parted with one of your Philcos," I said.

He looked unhappy. "Cash-flow problems," he said.

Max's store actually ran at a profit most of the time, thanks to his net-order business in rare vids. As a result he was unable to rely on the good old SBA.

"So you've met her, too," Max said. "Did she ask you to sit for her?"

"Sit? For a picture, you mean?"

"For a hologram," Max said. "She wanted to holograph my brain. She has a machine in her hotel room, and she asked me to come by for a scanning."

"Your brain?" I said. "Interesting."

Maybe that was what she had wanted from Tom Duke, I thought: a picture of his brain. Although even that was hard to imagine.

"What would she want that for?" I asked.

"She uses them in her stage act," Max said. "Or so she said." He sounded unconvinced.

"And did you?" I asked. "Sit for her, I mean?"

"No," Max said. "I didn't like the idea. I wasn't comfortable with it."

"I don't follow," I said. "What weren't you comfortable with?"

"With the idea of someone owning a picture of my brain. Capturing it, somehow—capturing who I am."

"You sound," I told him, "like one of those old-time primitives. You know, the ones who were afraid that the photographer would steal their souls."

"Yeah, but what is a soul anyway?" Max asked, seriously. "I don't know what it is."

"Come on," I said. "What would she get, after all? A picture of a bunch of electrical impulses racing around inside your head. This is Bayville, Max." I indicated the shiny automatic teller machines lined up in front of us. "This is the late twentieth century. This isn't Transylvania."

"I don't know," Max said. "I don't know what she wanted from me.

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Marianne, she's weird. Maybe it's silly, but she gives me the shivers, somehow."

"You're right," I said. "It is silly. You've been watching too many old 'Night Galleries.' "

The Bayville Hotel had once been the biggest and fanciest hotel in town, but like the rest of Bayville had fallen upon hard times. With the tourist trade down to a trickle, it survived mainly on bar receipts from the locals. The hotel's owner, Fred Barton, did quite well on NAA dole coupons, earning the loyalty of the arts community by holding frequent shows and exhibitions, and bringing in performance artists of one sort or another. The NAA usually picked up the tab for these as well.

Lily was supposed to meet me here later. I settled down at a table with Jim Atkins and Lizzie Palmer.

"A good crowd," I said, looking around.

I noticed Tom Duke sitting at the table closest to the stage, with Phil Conway and Fred Barton and a few others. He met my gaze with no flicker of recognition. He looked, I thought, somewhat under the weather, pale and tired and withdrawn.

"Tom looks a little hungover," I said.

"More than just hungover," Jim said. He leaned forward confidentially. "I ran into him at the supermarket and he didn't even seem to know me. I mean normally I'd run the other way when I saw Duke, he's such a loud son of a bitch. But he was next in the check-out line, so I thanked him for the party, and he looked at me as if he really couldn't place me."

"It was a pretty good party," I said.

"It was if he had been completely drained," Jim said. "As if there was nothing left of him."

"Maybe it was Dora's canapés," I suggested, but I knew what he was leading up to. In his own way, Jim was as big a gossip as Lily.

"It was Marianne Reiss," Jim said.

"What about her?"

"She's a dangerous woman," he said, so melodramatic a pronouncement that I thought for a moment that he was kidding me, spoofing a scene from one of my most *noir*ish synths. Yet he seemed deadly serious.

"Dangerous?" I said. "How do you mean?"

"She's a walking archetype," Jim said. "Pure anima. She'll suck you in and suck you dry."

Although these days Jim peddled recombinant DNA and splicing machines, he had once been a Jungian analyst, back when there had still been a demand for Jungian analysts.

"You're making her out to be some sort of vampire."

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"That's *your* metaphor," Jim said. "Not mine. But see if it works for you."

"I prefer to think of her as a *femme fatale*," I said.

"I don't believe this conversation," Lizzie said. "I just don't believe you could stereotype someone like that. You're both just projecting these fantasies of yours on her. It has nothing to do with *her*. It has to do with how you see women."

She had a point, of course.

"I didn't say all women were like that," Jim said.

And then the lights came down and the singer came out on the stage, cutting the argument short.

I am not a music critic, nor even someone who closely follows modern art music. I can offer no definitive view of Marianne's performance. I can speak only of its effect on me. I was thrilled, and, yes, chilled as well. Not until the lights came up for the intermission did I notice that Lily had failed to join me.

Marianne had switched from her usual black garb to a long white dress which heightened the darkness of her eyes and hair. Holograms were projected around her, changing constantly as she sang: Holograms of stars without end, holograms of the human brain, holograms of constantly shifting abstract patterns—a lattice, a cobweb, a tunnel, a spiral.

No musicians accompanied her. She was surrounded by a series of machines, producing various sounds or playing back various tapes. She coordinated their contributions from a small keyboard hanging from a chain around her neck, building a dense wall of sound.

I found it difficult to identify the individual components of this aural collage, although later I would access reviews of her tapes which noted many of her sources, from the songs of the whales to the hissing of radio telescopes.

Her voice wove in and out of this bizarre found music, sometimes singing, sometimes chanting, sometimes speaking, sometimes in English or some other language I could recognize, sometimes in stranger tongues, sometimes in outright gibberish. An occasional fragment, even an entire verse, might soar out clearly over the room, and I would strain towards an understanding which finally eluded me.

anomaly
anomaly
light is the anomaly
the anomaly
energy is the anomaly
we are the anomaly
riding like foam upon the tides of night

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darkness waits
je veux voir
la visage de nuit . . .
the end is in the beginning
the beginning is in the end
the whole contains the parts
the parts contain the whole . . .
open your eyes
open your eyes
open your eyes and look inside

And yet at some level I *did* understand it, for when the lights came up for the intermission after some thirty minutes of this I was soaked in sweat. And when I got up from my seat to cross to the teleterminal to call Lily my legs felt distinctly shaky.

"What did I say?" Jim said. "Pure anima."

But even Jim seemed subdued. He took a long and thoughtful swig of his beer.

Lily was not coming. Josh, her six year old, had come down with the mumps.

When I returned to the table, Lizzie was saying something about "dark matter."

"Dark what?" I said.

"Dark matter," Lizzie said. "I think part of what she was singing about was dark matter. You know she was an astronomer?"

"Phil mentioned it," I said. "He told me that she was an astronaut at some point, too."

"Right," Lizzie said. "She went up to the OrbLab to gather some data. I remember that Jack was quite excited about it."

Lizzie's older brother had been an astronomy professor out at CalTech before they closed down the universities, and all the big telescopes, too. He had then gone off to work for the Saudis, who were putting up their first orbital telescope.

"She was working on dark matter," Lizzie said. "She was one of the team who used dark matter to date the end of the universe. She was all over the news shows for a while. She wasn't the senior member of the team, she could only been twenty-five or twenty-six at the time, although Jack said that she was brilliant. But she was the one who made the flight, and of course, she was photogenic as hell."

I vaguely remembered the story she was referring to, how scientists had forecast the end of the universe. It had made headlines not long before the start of the Pause, as if to distract us from the gathering storm clouds on the home front. Actually I found it more depressing than dis-

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tracting. It was true that the end of the universe, as now revealed for us by science, was a very long time ahead, several hundred thousand billion years, quite long enough for me to put my affairs in order. But I would rather not have known about it, all the same.

"So now," Lizzie said, "she's singing about what she found. What the dark matter told her."

"What is dark matter, anyway?" I asked. And so she told me.

Dark matter was the realm of cosmic shadows, the invisible empire beneath the thin veil of ordinary matter. Lurking there always, pushing and pulling the visible universe this way and that.

It had been tracked originally through the rotation of the spiral galaxies. The speed of rotation should have varied with the amount of visible matter present to exert a gravitational force. But the rotation curves came in flat, no matter how far out to the edge you pushed, no matter how thin the visible stars. That was how we knew that there was something *else* there, something we couldn't see, filling in for the visible matter, a massive dark halo.

There was more of this dark matter than of anything else, much more—it was almost everything there was.

"Suppose you left a loaf of bread out too long," Lizzie said. "And in the morning there was a mold on the crust. That's us. Or rather, that's the universe as we know it, the visible universe. A kind of mold on the crust. For all we know, matter as we know it may be just an accident, some kind of weird side-effect of the real business of cosmology."

"I'm not sure I like that analogy," I said.

"It's like she sang," Lizzie said. "Light is the anomaly . . . *we* are the anomaly."

Marianne and her colleagues had made new and more accurate calculations of the mass of all the matter in the universe, light and dark. Knowing the true mass of the universe, and the rate at which it was expanding, they were able to project forward to the time when that expansion would falter and cease. When all that matter, light and dark but mostly dark, would begin to fold in upon itself, collapsing back slowly into that primal egg from which the universe had once been formed.

Not everyone accepted all the assumptions on which their model was based, but so far no one had successfully challenged it, either.

I found the whole thing rather dizzying. Tracking one or two hundred years of wholesale prices seemed no big deal at all. Who was I to talk of long waves?

"In other words," Jim said, "she's telling us in her songs that we're all washed up, finished even before we begin. We're just some kind of biological scum on the waves to begin with, and it doesn't matter how hard we strive, because in the end it's going to come to nothing."

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"I haven't noticed you doing too much striving lately," I said.

"I wonder if something happened to her out there on the OrbLab," Jim said.

"What kind of something?" I asked.

"Some kind of nervous breakdown," he said. "It's not unknown for astronauts to crack up one way or another, or at least to get religion. It's like they saw the elephant."

"The what?"

"An old pioneer expression. Some of the would-be settlers, following the California Trail, would turn back. Suddenly it was all too big for them, too raw. The wilderness dwarfed them. It terrified them. And they would say they had seen the elephant. Sometimes you hear the same thing from backpackers. Maybe that's what she saw out there. Out there looking at all that emptiness, and knowing what was underneath it, this dark matter stuff. She saw the elephant and she just couldn't deal with it."

"I think her songs say more than that," Lizzie said. "I think she's saying we're not going to find ourselves out there, out in the physical universe, that we have to look inside."

"Paperback-rack mysticism," Jim said. "But sure, that would be a useful defense mechanism."

"Do Jungians believe in defense mechanisms?" I asked, but I was never to hear the answer, because the lights went down for Marianne's second set.

This performance was less strident than the first, more like a series of dark lullabies, soothing us down towards that long sleep, yet similar in its essentials.

Afterwards, Fred Barton opened the bars and a party ensued with much the same cast of characters as the previous night. Tonight, though, Tom Duke lurked always a few paces away from Marianne, waxy-faced and stricken-looking, as though afraid to move closer. He was not, in any case, her chosen companion that night. That honor fell upon Phil Conway, of all people.

I complimented Marianne on her performance, and left the party soon afterwards. I was not feeling much in the mood for human companionship. Marianne's singing had left me feeling oddly washed-out.

On my way to the stairs leading up to my apartment above the store, I saw my terminal in the back room staring at me reproachfully. There was a red light blinking. It was a message to call Wayne Houghton. I did not call him, but I did sit down, wearily, to load up his data, and began to work the wave forms.

I began by checking Wayne's curves on long-term interest rates and

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wholesale prices, the classic Kondratieff variables. It was soothing, in a way, letting my fingers push the mouse back and forth over the desk to collate the new results with a hundred years of historical data. I did it almost automatically, with no real thought of the outcome. I had performed exactly the same exercise the previous year, without significant result.

After an hour or so the first curves began to appear. I was surprised to see that there was indeed something there, something still barely noticeable, yet still significant. I felt a strange mixture of elation and alarm. I rechecked a few operations, but everything seemed in order. I shut down the program, and sat back in my chair.

After sitting there staring for a while, I accessed a public data net for the files on Marianne Reiss. There was a good deal of material available under different headings.

Under "Arts/Entertainment" I found a short biography, confirming the broad outlines of the career Phil Conway had sketched out, and filling in a few more details. She was, I learned, the daughter of merchant banker Harold Reiss. Old money for sure. Her family still controlled one of the world's leading merchant banks, one which had survived the collapse almost intact.

As well as reviews of her tapes and public performances, I found articles about both her poetry and her work in holography, all highly respectful in tone. Far from the dilettantism Dora had suggested, there seemed to be a consistency in her artistic activities. Her poems were much like her song lyrics, while the holograms she had once exhibited were those that now surrounded her on stage: one of her major holography shows had been titled "Outer Space," featuring various starscapes, while another, "Inner Space," had focused on the human brain in various states of consciousness.

Under "Astronomy" I found an even greater wealth of material, on her studies of dark matter and her role in the OrbLab mission, the latter being the usual dull minutiae about how the astronauts spent their day.

There was a further file under "Neurology," thinner than the others, containing abstracts of technical papers she had published in the field. These publications spanned only a few years, tapering off as abruptly as they had begun, but for a while they had come thick and fast: "Form Constants in Near-Death Experiences"; "Holographic Representations of the Synaptic Wave-Front"; "Electrical Hyperarousal, Hallucination, and Lucid Dreaming"; "Serotonin Deprivation in the Fantasy Prone Personality"; and so on.

I scanned a few of these abstracts, but for the most part found them too densely technical to make much sense of. "The brain can be viewed as a kind of holographic machine," I read in one, "creating images which

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are perceived as external to the machinery . . . As the parts of a hologram each contain the whole, so does the brain contain the larger world of which it is itself a part."

Looking for a little light relief, I scanned the listing of video appearances, choosing a spot from a well-known newsvid show, around the time of her greatest astronomical celebrity. She looked younger, but no softer, no warmer. She began by speaking quite technically on the subject of dark matter, and what it indicated about the future of our universe. The interviewer, obviously becoming bored, changed the subject, engaging her in some desultory reminiscence about her one trip into space.

"Would you go up there again if you had the chance?" he asked. "There's talk about going to Mars, next."

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "The planets are not really my specialty. In any case I think once was quite enough."

The interviewer asked about her plans.

"I'm going back to school," she told him.

"Surely you don't need to study more astronomy?"

"Oh no," she said. "I'm going to study the human brain. It's another kind of universe. Maybe even a bigger one."

There were two more messages from Wayne Houghton on my terminal the next morning. Wearily, I placed the call.

"I'm sorry, Wayne," I told him. "I'm not finished yet."

"But you've started?"

"Yes," I said.

"And?"

"I think you may be right," I said, reluctantly.

"When do you think you might finish?" Wayne asked. "We'd like to make an announcement on the weekend."

"What's the big hurry?" I asked. "We're only talking leading indicators, after all. Nothing is going to happen for months, if it's going to happen at all."

And then I realized what was going on.

"The Russians," I said. "They're touching down Saturday."

"So what?" Wayne asked, clearly uncomfortable. "It doesn't matter what the Russians are doing."

His voice lost its sheepish note, became strident. "We'll build our own rockets now. Forget Mars, who needs it? We'll mine the asteroids, we'll go to Jupiter, we'll fly to the stars. Everything will be possible."

"I don't want to mine the asteroids," I said. "I don't want to fly to the stars. Actually I'm pretty happy with things the way they are."

"You've forgotten," Wayne said. "You've forgotten how it is to work, to build."

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"We're the vanguard of the new leisure society," I said. "Or at least, so they've been telling us all these years."

"It's an aberration," Wayne said. "You can't stop history. We can't live like this forever. It's against human nature. There's more to life than twiddling your controls and mixing up Donald Duck and Kafka and Peckinpah and whatever the hell else."

"*The Trials of Joseph Duck*," I said. "You may have something there. If I use it, I'll make sure you get a credit."

"I'm sorry," he said, forcing a smile. "I didn't mean to knock your synth work. It's just that this is important to me. How close are you to finishing?"

"I have a lot to do this week," I said. "I may not get finished by Saturday. You can announce without me, surely."

"We'd like you on board. In fact, if you don't want to come up here, I'd like to bring down a news crew so they can interview you. Assuming you're in general agreement, of course."

I thought about that. Obviously they did not really want my opinion, or the use of my technical skills, rusty as they were. They wanted my *endorsement*. They wanted my celebrity, such as it was. They wanted to have "the man who predicted the Pause" announce its end to a grateful nation.

Wayne knew as well as I did that if the Pause was going to end, it would do so whether I said so or not. But there were elections coming up in a few months, and the embarrassing business of the Russian rocket, and every little bit of good news helped.

"I'll let you know," I said, and cut the connection.

I was still hunched over the terminal working the wave forms when Phil Conway dropped by. I was sufficiently involved that I was aware of his presence only when he placed a hand on my shoulder and peered at the screen.

"A new type of synth?" he asked dubiously, watching the colored lines weave in and out of each other.

"Not exactly," I said. "This is what you might call the real world. Maybe."

I shut down the program and turned away from the screen, rubbing my eyes.

"What can I do for you, Phil?" I asked.

Conway was a rare visitor to my store. I don't think he ever read a book, old or new, excepting only manuscripts from NAA dole applicants.

"I was wondering if I could buy you lunch."

That was even more unusual. Normally you would buy Conway lunch.

"Sure," I said. "Why not?"

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As we walked down to the seafood bar by the harbor, I studied him closely, noticing a certain hesitancy about him, a new and strange uncertainty.

"I don't know if I really want to hear this," I said, as we sat at the bar.

"I tried to talk to Jim," he said. "He didn't make a lot of sense."

"He told you about anima, right?" I said, hunching down over my plate of steamed mussels.

"I never had much time for Jung," Conway said. "He seemed to me so unscientific."

Conway would have been the sort of poet who would bore you with discussions of how much RAM you needed in your poetry machine, and whether *Poetwrite* did T. S. Eliot better than *Versestar*.

"But you don't want to talk about Jung," I said.

"Not really," he said.

He hesitated.

I cleaned up the last of my mussels and looked up. Conway had not touched his food. He was staring out the window, out at the ocean.

"About Marianne," I prompted. "You wanted to talk to me about Marianne."

Mention of the name seemed to startle him. He gripped the edge of the table.

"I don't know what to do," he said.

"About Martha?" I asked.

Conway was one of the few people in Bayville I knew who lived with a legal spouse, although we didn't see very much of her. She did her macrame and looked after her kids and hosted the occasional polite party, still the perfect faculty wife after all these years. It was widely known that Conway played the field, harvesting young playwrights and kite-painters as he could. Presumably Martha knew this; he was not exactly discreet about it. The only difference in this case would be that Marianne would have, as Lily put it, collected *him*, rather than the other way around.

"About Marianne," he said. "About me."

"Are you going to eat those?" I asked, indicating his mussels.

"I'm not hungry," he said, pushing the plate towards me. "I don't know what to do," he said, again.

I ate in silence, waiting for him to come to the point.

"I've never felt this way," he said.

"Sure you did," I said. "You just forgot."

"You don't know what you're talking about," he said. "I don't mean *sex*, that isn't what I mean. . . ."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

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"She was cold," he said, in a strangled kind of voice. "I couldn't warm her. I tried, I did try."

The temperature outside was in the eighties, and there had been no air-conditioning in Mabel's Seafood Bar for years. But Conway was shivering, his teeth actually chattering.

It gave me a slightly creepy feeling. I tried to joke my way out of it.

"Vampires are cold," I said. "Or so I hear. I couldn't say I ever met one. Not to my knowledge, anyway."

"What does that have to do with Marianne?"

"Probably nothing," I said. "It's just popped into my mind. Max Nussbaum thought she wanted to steal his soul. Or at any rate, scan his brain. Maybe it's some new kind of vampirism."

Phil shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"She did," he said. "She did that to me. Scanned my brain for one of her holograms."

"She wanted your brain? You should be flattered."

"You think she did?" Phil asked.

"Did what?"

"Stole my soul?"

"I'm not sure you had one to begin with."

"Stop fooling around," Phil said. "This is serious."

"No it isn't," I said, wearying of my joke. "Actually it's very silly. Soul-stealing dark ladies are fantasy, Phil, pretty dumb fantasy at that. What we've got here is at best a rather routine *noir*: middle-aged man pursues doomed passion for enigmatic *femme fatale*, failed poet searches for his muse, something like that."

"We're not talking about one of your synths," Phil said. "We're talking about my life."

"It's your script," I said.

"You don't feel it?" he asked. "She doesn't have any effect on you?"

"Of course I feel it," I said. "It's just that I know what it is." I spoke, however, with more confidence than I felt.

"Go back to your office, Phil," I told him, "and find yourself a nice young cloud sculptor. Or go home to Martha, you could do a lot worse. Forget about Marianne Reiss. Forget she was ever here. *She* will."

"So cold . . ." Conway said, hugging himself for warmth. And then he got up and left the table.

The wave forms were beautiful. I could no longer doubt that it was nearly over, that this long vacation of ours was finally coming to an end.

I sat there for a while, wondering what I was going to do with my findings. I did not much like to be used in the way that the government planned to use me. But there would be a certain pleasing symmetry in

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closing this particular circle. And doing so might help me in coming to grips with my own ambivalence about the very different future which suddenly confronted all of us.

So in the end I put in a call to Wayne Houghton.

"All right," I told him. "Come on down. We'll do your dog and pony show."

"I can be there tomorrow morning," he said.

"You'll probably find me at the hotel," I said. "Fred Barton is throwing a Marsathon. There'll be music, and prizes for the best costume."

"I hope you're not planning to wear a costume," Wayne said nervously.

"I have these wonderful green antennae," I said. "I think they'll go over big in the newsvids."

Wayne stared at me long enough to know that I was kidding.

"Ha," he said, finally. "I'll see you tomorrow."

I was just shutting down my terminal when Marianne dropped by. She was wearing a long cloak over a one-piece swimming suit. The cloak started out red but changed colors as she moved around the store, adjusting to the ambient light levels.

"Nice cloak," I told her. "I never saw one like that."

"I got it in San Francisco," she told me. "It's a new biosynth process. It's quite popular in the cities."

"I don't get out of Bayville very much," I said.

"You should," she said. "It's not like when you left. The crime is really under control. There are hardly any fires anymore. There are new ideas, new fashions. It's quite exciting, actually."

She did not sound very excited.

"I was just going to the beach," she told me. "I was wondering if you'd like to come along."

"It's a little late," I said. It was nearly four in the afternoon.

"This is the best time of day," she said. "You don't get a burn."

"Sure," I said.

I went upstairs to change, and then we walked down to the beach.

We settled down on our towels, and sat looking out at the sea. The tide was on its way out, leaving pools glistening in the sand. Small boys were mounting major irrigation projects. The water would soon drain away, and then the waves would return to smash down their dams and parapets. But it looked like a lot of fun.

"You've been a real hit in Bayville," I told her. "You've developed quite a following."

"It's nice to make an impression," she said.

"Phil Conway, for example," I said. "I think Phil would follow you anywhere."

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"I hope not," she said. And then, after a pause, "I didn't encourage him, you know."

"But you collected him all the same," I said. "And Tom Duke, too."

"Collected?" she said. She laughed. "I suppose I did, in a way. But not intentionally. I'm a negative force, you see. I seem to attract positives. People like Tom and Phil, so full of themselves and their plans."

"They amuse you?" I asked. "With all their hurrying about?"

"No," she said. "That's not it. Actually I sometimes think I would like to be like them. So rooted in the everyday, so oblivious . . ."

"As opposed to?"

"As opposed to the way I am."

I thought, then, about the cold dark stuff that wreathed even the sun and the coldness that was within her.

"Someone who accepts their cosmic insignificance?" I asked, recalling Jim Atkins' interpretation of her songs.

"I recognize it," she said. "I didn't say I accepted it."

"You haven't been an insignificant presence here," I said. "You've made a lot of waves."

"Waves," she said. "Yes. I suppose I enjoy it. Coming somewhere like this and shaking things up a little, hearing what people say about me. What do they say, actually?"

"Quite a few things," I said. And then, perhaps a little ingenuously, "The best was that you're some kind of vampire."

"A vampire?" She laughed again. "Sucking blood and all that? Too messy for me, I'm afraid."

"It's only a metaphor," I said.

"For fear of sexuality," she said. "Particularly female sexuality. Or so I seem to recall from my Pop Culture 101."

"Perhaps," I said. "But in this case, the implication is also of a psychological vampirism. Of leeching people's energy, somehow. Stealing their essence."

"I holographed them," she said. "If that's what you mean."

"Why?" I asked.

"It's a research project of mine. I'm always on the lookout for cooperative subjects."

"You didn't ask me," I said.

"I would have got around to it," she said. Her liquid eyes glittered with amusement. "I wouldn't mind having an economist in my collection."

Marianne's hotel room was cluttered with her acquisitions. Max's Philco sat on top of a peculiarly ugly chrome coffee table. Stacks of magazines were piled precariously on the floor. There were old radios, old alarm clocks, even an old toaster. We picked our way through this

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clutter toward the scanning machine. It was a suitcase-sized object with attached helmet and goggles. The helmet had electrodes which she attached with glue to my scalp.

"What are the goggles for?" I asked.

"They're a mechanical means of simulating and then stimulating hallucination. They're perfectly legal. In fact you can buy them in any novelty store."

"Hallucination?" I echoed, a little alarmed now.

"I'm collating a series of holograms of the brain in different states of consciousness, and I'm particularly interested in the altered or hallucinatory states. There are various ways to get to those states: drugs, sensory deprivation, lucid dreaming, near-death experience, even music, sometimes. My music is another approach to the same goal, but I'm not quite there yet. In the meantime, the goggles are another way of getting there, and an easy way."

I hesitated.

"Don't worry," she said. "It's a very short trip. Afterwards there may be some slight disorientation, but it'll pass."

I reached for the goggles.

"Then again," she said, "maybe I am going to steal your soul. But it grows back after a while."

I put the goggles on. Abstract shapes danced before my eyes. A lattice. A funnel. I recognized them from her stage show.

"What you're seeing," she said, "are the so-called form constants, the forms that repeatedly show up under the influence of psychedelic drugs. They were first mapped out back in the 1930s."

Now I was looking down a lattice-like tunnel with a bright light at its center.

"People who come through near-death experiences report the same shapes," she said.

"What are they?" I asked. "What do they mean?"

"They're standing wavefronts of firing neurons, separated by layers of inactive neurons. We think it's the brain seeing itself, seeing its own coding mechanisms."

The tunnel became a cobweb, pulsing with colored lights. And then I was falling, very slowly, through the web, through the space, and through the time. Large metallic objects, rusted and corroded, drifted around me as I fell, turning slowly, dissolving slowly into dust. And then I was surrounded by vast dim stars, blinking faintly through clouds of blackness.

I continued to fall for what seemed a thousand years. And then suddenly I was moving upwards, up on the crest of a vast wave of white light, up towards the greater light that shone above me. And it seemed

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to me that I understood, that I understood everything, except that somehow I could not grasp what it was that I now understood.

"Did you program the whole thing?" I asked her, afterwards, as we sat sipping iced coffee on her balcony.

"No," she said. "After the initial cues, you construct it for yourself."

She told me a little, then, about her work in neurology.

"When I began to study this altered states stuff, we had an enormous government grant," she said. "They thought they could use it to train astronauts, prepare them for alien landscapes. Then they realized they couldn't afford to have astronauts anyway, and they cancelled the funding. By then I had learned all I wanted to know. My interests had always been a little different."

"What are your interests?" I asked.

"You know anything about holography?" she asked. "If you look at the stored code, it's not a visual image at all. It's a record of the wave pattern scattered by the object, a frozen wavefront. The same wavefront is repeated over and over, across the surface of the hologram. You can reproduce the whole from any part of it. Everything is enfolded. The whole is enfolded in its parts, and each part contains the whole.

"The brain works on similar lines. Information is distributed through networks of neurons, and reconstructed holographically. People used to talk about the mind as though you could locate it physically. But you can't, because it's like a hologram. It's scattered. It's everywhere and it's nowhere."

"So?" I said.

"So," she said, "the mind is a kind of holographic machine. But there's a sense in which the world is a kind of hologram, too. And the mind, which is part of that world, also contains it, contains the whole. It enfolds it."

"Philosophically, maybe," I said. "But surely not in any practical sense."

"Usually we're not aware of it," she said, "of that world enfolded within us. We learn from early infancy on to make distinctions between ourselves and the world outside, to build a barrier between the two realms of experience. And yet there are occasions when the barrier breaks down, when we do apprehend that vast hologram enfolded within us, or at least come close to it."

"You're talking about hallucinations?"

"Hallucinations. Spiritual experiences. Oceanic feelings. Moments of transcendence. There are a lot of different words for it, but mostly they come down to the same thing. Our brains seem to contain the circuitry for these experiences, even though there's no obvious evolutionary reason

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why this should be so. Near-death experiences seem to involve this circuitry, and so do hallucinations. Often people report a feeling of almost-knowing something of great importance. As if something had switched on a significance signal in the brain."

"But surely that's just part of the delusion," I said. "You think you're learning something big, but you never do come back with anything very significant."

"It's not something you can learn about," she said. "It's not something you can bring back with you into the everyday. It's just there. It's what you experience when the brain begins to drop all the walls it has built up over the years, the walls between the self and the not-self, and let it all in, perceive the entire hologram rather than just tiny parts of it."

"There are mystics," I said, "who claim that they do what you're describing on a regular basis. Merge somehow with the universe."

"Yes," she said. "I plan to go to India soon and scan some, if they'll allow me to. Maybe it will help me in figuring out how to control the process."

"Control it? What for?"

"Don't you see?" she said. "The world doesn't have to be the way we perceive it now. We could reshape it as we like. The part enfolds the whole, after all. We only have to change the part."

I was for a moment unable to think of any response to this statement. What had Jim said? Paperback-rack mysticism?

For all I knew, this could have been just another one of her games, another of the calculated enigmas with which she enshrouded her life. And yet she told me all this with such intensity, such conviction, that I was sure that she did believe it. And at the time I half-believed that it was possible, or at least wanted to believe it.

I suppose, too, that I had at last put down whatever frail barrier I had tried to construct between us, that in the final analysis I was no different from Tom Duke or Phil Conway. And perhaps in a way she did steal my soul, although she did not do it with her machine.

"It's a long way from dark matter," I said, finally.

"You've been researching me," she said. "Very flattering. But yes, a long way, as far as I can get."

"Kind of an ambitious project," I said. "A little bigger than my synths."

"That's another way of trying to control things," she said, "another way of trying to forget about your own powerlessness. We want the same thing, except that I'm playing for higher stakes."

Perhaps I should have offered to join her in her project. Or perhaps I should have argued its probable insanity. But I did neither. At that moment, I remained balanced precariously between the two worlds, the inner world of the mind and the outer world of events, pulled this way

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and that but reaching no final conclusion as to which was the more real. It felt like a familiar place for me to be.

Looking back on it now, I am better able to see the contortions in her logic, the enormous unlikelihood of her project succeeding. Yet even now I feel that I have no real right to pass such judgments. After all, I have never seen the elephant. Maybe I have glimpsed it, once or twice, out of the corner of my eye, plotting the impact of falling commodity prices across the years, the dreary but implacable waves that sweep us helplessly along. But I have been careful never to look it in the face.

Some time later, as I had hoped but not allowed myself to expect, we made love among the clutter of her hotel room, which was neither the climax nor the anticlimax to these events.

I could not say whether or how any of this time we spent together changed me, then or later, as it had seemed to change Tom Duke or Phil Conway. I know that it did not change Marianne.

She was cold, as Conway had told me. She was cold and we could not warm her, not for long and not in any lasting way. She had come too close to the truth. And if you were not careful, she could take you there, too.

Over dinner before her last performance, I told her about my own recent research project.

"So it's really ending," she said. "I think I sensed as much. After all these years."

"Maybe you could get your old job back," I said.

"Which one?" she asked. "Anyway, I like how I live now."

"Once everyone else gets back in the swing of things," I said, "you may find it hard to resist."

"I'll resist."

"Are you planning to watch the Mars shot at Fred's tomorrow?" I asked.

"Sure," she said. "It'll be a good opportunity to say good-bye to everyone. I'll be leaving Bayville on Sunday."

"Oh," I said. "I thought you might be staying on awhile."

"Bayville is a nice town. It's the sort of town I wish I had found ten years ago. But now . . . Now it will be like everywhere else."

"Where are you heading for?"

"Perhaps Nairobi," she said. "I've never been to Kenya. And there may be some interesting subjects there."

I had been to Kenya once myself, as it happened, for one of the very last of those bloated international banking conferences. I had been asked to present a paper on the relationships between long cycle deflation, international debt, and banking failures. I had not been the hit of the

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evening, but the food and the drugs and the women had all been superb, and the jungle had impressed me.

"It's hot there," I said.

"I like the heat," she said.

By noon, when Wayne Houghton showed up, the bar of the Bayville Hotel was packed. A pick-up band of local artists were thrashing their way through a bunch of old rock and roll songs, while monsters and Martian princesses cavorted on the dance floor. Most eyes, however, were on the wide screen vid, where the Russian landing module was settling down in that ancient dust.

"The vid crew is outside," Wayne told me.

"In a moment," I told him. "I want to see this."

And so I watched as the cosmonauts crept cautiously from their module to take their first steps in that strange new landscape.

I watched at the edge of my seat. See, I wanted to tell Marianne. We're not done for yet.

Not that it would have made any impression. For Marianne this little scene would be only the latest act in a long-running theatrical production played out by virtually the entire human species, in that on-going charade through which we tried to persuade ourselves that we were of some significance in this universe, that contrary to all the evidence we could indeed bend and shape it as we pleased.

Looking at the events up on the screen the way Marianne would have looked at them, the way I myself might normally have looked at them, too, there was something faintly absurd in the spectacle of those clunky cosmonauts in their oversize space suits stomping around in the dust. And yet there was something inspiring, too. I found myself cheering along with everyone else.

We were not pleased, particularly, that it was the Russians who were doing this. And yet it seemed right, finally, that someone should be doing it.

"Where are the canals?" I heard Tom Duke shout. "I want to see the canals!"

Duke, already comfortably drunk, seemed to have recaptured all his old bombast. What had Marianne said? "It grows back after a while." I noticed that Dora Duncan sat beside him.

Lily was sitting at a table with Jim and Lizzie. I had had a cool reception from Lily, the Bayville grapevine having done its usual work, and was therefore sharing a table with Max Nussbaum and a couple of the other local merchants.

I had not seen Marianne since the previous night. She had checked out that morning, Fred Barton had told me, to catch an early flight to

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Boston, leaving regrets that she could not be with us. I had been disappointed, but somehow not terribly surprised. She would sing us her songs of the shadow universe as long as we wished. But watching humanity conquering new frontiers would not be her style.

"Ken," Wayne said again as I continued to stare fascinated at the vidscreen.

"All right," I said.

There would be plenty of time to celebrate later.

"So it's really over?" the interviewer had asked me, for at least the third time.

"Almost," I said. "For another fifty or sixty years, anyway."

"And what about you?" he asked. "What are your plans?"

Wayne had arrived that morning with a job offer in hand for a full-time government sinecure. He had also told me that the universities were about to re-open, and that should I wish I could soon resume my previous career. I told him I would think about it.

"Oh, I don't know," I told the interviewer. "After this I'm going back to watch the cosmonauts. And then tomorrow I may start work on my new synth. And after that I'll just have to see how things go."

This final section of the interview did not make the newsvids. But the rest of it did. Indeed, it formed part of a special thirty minute bulletin breaking into the regularly scheduled programming around four in the afternoon, just as our cosmonaut heroes were setting up light housekeeping arrangements for the rapidly approaching Martian night.

My Bayville friends stared back and forth from the screen to me, their reactions ranging from elation to dismay. It was a disorienting experience for all of us.

"Tell me that it isn't true, Ken," Jim yelled.

"Oh, it's true enough," I said, feeling like the man who killed Santa Claus.

"So long Great American Renaissance," said Dora Duncan, climbing on a table and beginning to dance unsteadily. The rock band took up the beat, and soon everyone was on the dance floor. You couldn't hear what the President was mouthing so earnestly up on the screen, but no doubt we would hear it again and again.

It turned into quite a party, perhaps the best of all our parties, and certainly the last of the good ones. In the weeks to come there would only be a series of more-or-less tearful farewell bashes. One after another I would see my friends become restless and irritable as they felt the pull of the cities, the tug of a former life, and one after another they gave in and made their plans to depart.

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Tom Duke and Dora Duncan were among the first to leave.

"The Dow is up eighty points this month," Duke told me, new energy practically sparking around him. "You can just feel it in the air, feel the buzz. It's time to get the hell out of here."

Dora planned to go back to being a lawyer.

"But what about newfood?" I asked her.

She shrugged. "I can still do it on weekends. Although to tell you the truth, I was getting a little bored with it."

At one or another of these farewell parties I found that Lily was talking to me again, and we left the party together. And soon afterwards we began to speak of commitments, as we had so rarely done during the Pause, and finally we moved in together.

Towards the end of the summer, Phil Conway dropped by my store to tell me that he was moving on. I had seen very little of him; he had been busy winding down the NAA office. But now the job was done, and he was moving his family out west.

He looked well. He had lost weight, and his beard was neatly trimmed.

"How is Martha?" I asked.

"She's fine," he said. "Just fine. We'll be sorry to leave Bayville, of course, but we felt like it was time for a change."

"Are you going to teach?" I asked him.

"No," he said. He hesitated. "I thought I might write a novel. About a town like this one. About how we lived during the Pause."

"I'll look forward to reading it."

At the door he turned and said, "Have you heard anything from Marianne?"

"She's still singing," I told him. "She has a new tape out, it hit the nets last week. It's a little different. She's using African sounds now, although in essence it's the same."

"Maybe I'll access it," he said.

I doubted that he would.

And so we watched them leave, one by one, and in the end we succumbed, too, taking teaching positions at an East Coast university.

We have a summer home in Bayville now, Lily and I, and we come down in the long vacation, and on as many weekends as we can. Often I walk by my old bookstore, which seems to be doing a thriving business these days, with the return of the tourist trade. I buy the odd volume there myself.

I keep my Vostok stored in the attic of our summer house, and sometimes on a long summer evening I take it down and play with it like a well-remembered childhood toy. But I have done no serious work on it since the day of the Martian landing, and I doubt now that I ever will.

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Bayville is not the same, of course, but there are still many artists there, and Lizzie Palmer is still running her small press, and Jim Atkins is doing better business than ever in splicing machines. And meanwhile, back in the cities, the recovery proceeds apace.

No one, of course, can fail to be excited by the new stimulation everywhere in the land, the growth of entirely new industries, our bold thrust into outer space, the factories humming through the night in orbit above our heads, the ramscoops driving out towards the stars. I find myself, well beyond the point at which I had ever hoped to work again in my chosen profession, once again deeply committed and involved.

And yet sometimes, as I watch the waves breaking on the beach at Bayville, I hear voices murmuring in the surf, or in the songs of the whales, or in the quiet hissing of radio telescopes. And I think again of Marianne Reiss, voyaging into the final darkness of the macrocosm and the inner darkness of the mind. I think of her tracking the expanding wavefront that is the universe and the synaptic wavefront flashing inside our brains. I think of her, waiting for the longest wave of all to break and carry her down and carry her home. ●

BIRDS OF THE MUTANT RAIN FOREST

The setting sun slithers on the Mirror Owls
as they reflect the full spectrum
of rainbowed helliconia and lianas.
The Least Bird of Paradise, transparent
save for its milky breast and bones
and for the faintest pink of its blood,
picks at lemon beetles and ruby bees.
But an iridescent Ibis eclipses all
color with its phosphor-bright bill.
What changes are wrought in the world?
For now the females are brighter plumed,
wraiths flitting across the twilight airglow.

—Robert Frazier

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New Data on L. RON HUBBARD'S

WRITERS OF THE FUTURE CONTEST

by Algis Budrys

Good news. L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of The Future Contest has been extended to the end of 1987, and even if you don't win a prize there are fresh features that could do you a lot of good.

First, there are meaningful no-strings cash prizes, and fringe benefits including recognition, encouragement, and a publication offer to the winners and some runners-up. Added have been faster reporting times, professional writing hints on your stories that *nearly* made it, and a series of invitational tuition-free special workshops for winners and some finalists, taught by expert speculative-fiction writers. So if you're an aspiring author of fantasy or science fiction, with no more than three short stories or one novelette professionally published, here's all you do: Enter the contest.

Every three-month quarter, beginning January 1, there's a round of judging for original manuscripts up to 17,000 words. A panel of top judges then selects three winners of $1000, $750 and $500. Third and Second Place also receive framed, very handsome certificates. First place receives a trophy guaranteed to dominate almost any mantelpiece. . . . And while the checks are mailed to the winners quickly, the certificates and trophies are conferred at our annual Awards ceremony, to which our new writers are invited, expenses paid.

Then, from among the four quarterly First Place winners, a special panel of judges selects the winner of the L. Ron Hubbard Gold Award to The Author Of The Writers of The Future Story of The Year. The announcement is made at the Awards, and results in an even more elegant trophy, plus an additional $4000.

Want some? There's no entry fee, and submitting your manuscript conveys no publication rights. (We do ask you to enclose a stamped, self-addressed return envelope.)

What wins is any kind of good science fiction or fantasy, in the opinion of our top judges, who include Gregory Benford, Anne McCaffrey, Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle, Robert Silverberg, Jack Williamson, Gene Wolfe and Roger Zelazny.

Then there are the anthologies — *L. Ron Hubbard Presents WRITERS OF THE FUTURE Vols. I, II,* and, as of early 1987, *III.* I edit them for Bridge Publications, and we offer payments of up to $1000, in addition to the Contest prizes. The anthologies — which have impressed a lot of people, including other editors and publishers — publish the winners, and some runners-up. (They also include how-to-write essays by some of our judges.)

Summing up: If your story makes it into the semi-finals, you'll get it back with a helpfully intended critique from me. If it gets into the Finals, you may get a prize, you may at least get a publication offer, and if you're in the anthology, you're automatically invited to our next workshop, where we teach idea generation, idea improvement, and career management, along with other professional skills.

Good enough? Then you can write in for complete entry rules, or you can just go ahead and submit a manuscript, to:

Writers of the Future Contest
P.O. Box 1630
Los Angeles, CA 90078

A rational approach would be to borrow or buy the anthologies and study them. (The first two have an obsolete Contest address in them, but the mail will be forwarded.) They're $3.95 paperbacks, and you might as well see what you've been missing.

Meet you at the Awards?

— Algis Budrys

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by Sharon N. Farber

ICE DREAMS

"Ice Dreams" is the fifteenth story by Sharon N. Farber to appear in *IAsfm*. Dr. Farber is currently going through postgraduate medical education in the Midwest, and is following in the grand "physician-writer" tradition of Arthur Conan Doyle, Anton Chekov, and Dr. Mid-Nite.

art: J.K. Potter

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Ricky knew that the man in the room downstairs was a vampire.

He couldn't understand why no one else knew. Or maybe they knew, and just didn't care.

He'd tried to tell Mrs. Allison, watching television in the parlor that afternoon. "Shhh," she'd replied. She'd sat, leaning forward, arthritic hands clasped together, drinking in every word of "The Edge of the World."

"But it's important," Ricky had said.

"Oh!" she'd cried. "Now you've made me miss Dr. Brett Point's answer when he learned his wife was stuck in the blizzard with the CIA man."

"Blizzard?" He'd looked out the boarding house window to see pedestrians, sweating in the summer heat.

"The Ice Age Machine," she'd snapped. "Don't watch if you aren't going to pay attention."

So he'd gone and sat on the stairs, waiting for the other tenants to return home. Trudy the bank teller had been first, jacket dragging behind her, her bleached hair lying thin and damp about her face.

"Trudy!" Ricky had announced. "The new tenant on the second floor is a vampire."

"Is he young and single?" she'd sighed, starting up the stairs.

"Centuries old, I'd judge," he'd called after her. Then the quiet woman, whose room was next door to Ricky's, came in. She walked with her eyes focused on the open book before her, somehow managing to walk up the stairs, as well as to avoid Ricky, without missing a sentence.

"Hello Miss Bell. There's a vampire in the house," Ricky had called, then gave up. He decided to not even mention it during supper. No one else seemed to be wondering much about the new tenant's absence from the meal.

"If he wants to pay board and not eat, that's okay by me," said Mrs. Fitchner, the landlady.

Emboldened, Ricky had announced, "It's because he's a vampire. They don't need to eat, you know."

Everyone had stared at him, except for Miss Bell, concentrating on her book on the Boer war.

"They just drink blood," he'd ended lamely, aware that his brother, seated beside him, was turning red.

Thought is power, Ricky thought, as Tom entered the room just the moment he'd been thinking of his brother. Tom was small, thin, and had skin that seemed made of unbleached parchment. He appeared older than his years, which his relatives attributed to the responsibilities of caring for Ricky, and his students to early-onset fossilization.

Tom stood by the door, scrutinizing him. Then he half-smiled ruefully, waving his gaudy paperback at Ricky.

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"You're quiet tonight."

"So are you."

"Yeah, but I've been correcting book reports. You're hearing voices again, aren't you?"

"No!"

Ricky had long ago learned to deny the voices; otherwise they'd put him back in the hospital and make him take Haldol until the voices went away. Then he'd be stuck for weeks in that awful place with no one but the other patients to keep him company. He was content to stay home, take his monthly injection of Prolixin, and deny the voices.

"Attaboy," said his voice. *"No use telling him about the vampire either. Tom never believes us."*

"Shall I help correct some papers?"

"No thanks."

"I'm very good at grammar."

"I know. It's the philosophical asides that confuse the kids."

Tom went back into his own bedroom. Lying down, he opened up *The Obliterator: Firefight in Finland.* So far it was as good as *Sabotage in Sicily,* though nowhere near the level of *Mission to Morocco,* which Tom considered the gold standard for the series.

He found the dog-eared page.

" 'Crazy American! What can you do to help us?' queried the leader of the schoolgirls. 'The Nazis have slain our teacher and have the bus surrounded. We are doomed; we shall all die virgins.' "

" '*Things are always darkest before the dawn,*' replied the Obliterator. 'My grandfather the sensei always said that. He also said, *that's why you should carry a lantern.*' His strong sinewy hands patted her reassuringly on the shoulder. 'We'll just have to blow the Nazis up. Help me with this dynamite.' "

Tom put the book down, closing his eyes. He could see the bus, stranded in the snow, the driver's blood a red pool in the moonlight. The girls huddle together; they're the girls from his twelfth grade Survey of Literature class. Only now, they're not giggling or passing notes or flirting with the jocks; they're terrified.

"Don't worry, girls. I've got the situation in hand."

They look up at the tall stranger, clad in ninja black, with his strong determined chin. Never have they seen such an attractive, charismatic individual. "We have faith in you," says the redhead in the second row. The others are too awed to speak.

"It'll be dangerous. Are any of you willing to help?"

He knows they will all shake their heads, but is not dismayed. They are, after all, only schoolgirls.

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"Wait for me, I'll just be a moment," he winks. He has a job to do, a dangerous job, a man's job, a job only he can do. . . .

In the room beside the bath, Trudy combed out her hair. The roots were starting to show black again. She sighed, thinking of another two days before the weekend—two days working behind the counter, taking deposits and handing out cash. Trudy always tried to remember to say "Have a nice day"; with her blonde hair and cheery phrases, the customers seem to think she's a California girl. But so far only olive-skinned men from unpronounceable countries have tried to attract her attention.

She sighed again. "Stop sighing," her mother had always said. "You sound like an asthmatic. You think a doctor wants to marry an asthmatic—he doesn't see them all day in the office?" She thought about the men she knew: married men, inveterate swingers, gays. And the nameless, faceless masses that she waits on daily. . . .

"Well?" she asks the olive-skinned man who is leering at her across the bars. "Deposit or withdrawal?"

"I would like to deposit one million dollars cash to your account."

"What!"

He leers more. "In return, my master, who has admired you from afar as you perform your duties, expects only one evening of your time."

"What kind of girl do you think I am!" She glares. "Buzz off, creep."

"You refuse?" The foreigner is incredulous. He leaves, returning momentarily with the bank president, another man following in his shadow. "For god's sake, don't make us lose this account," hisses the president, and introduces the Count. . . . Trudy imagines the name as short but unpronounceable.

Then she sees him. He is tall, and suave, and dark-haired. His suit costs her entire year's salary. He looks a bit like Dr. Brett Point, on the soap opera.

"You must at least have dinner with me," says the Count. "Now that I know that such a stunning creature as yourself is virtuous as well, my intentions are only honorable."

Mrs. Allison was thinking more directly of Dr. Brett Point. She lay in bed, the glow from the streetlamps outside making the room a place of shadows and strange patches of light. On the window sill, a brush belonging to her late toy poodle caught the light; on the dresser, her late husband's bowling trophy cast an ominous shadow. Mrs. Allison never threw anything away.

"Have you found it?" hisses Dr. Point, leaning over her shoulder as she searches the iron chest they have found in the attic of the House of Haunted

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Despair. Though they know that the ghosts are but a foreign-agent ploy to confuse them, still the night seems eerie.

"It must be here," she replies. "This is where the Mafia hid the treasure map."

She feels his breath upon her ear.

"Oh god!" he cries suddenly. "How can I remain faithful to Raven when you are here, with me now? I want to be strong—but my attraction to you is far stronger!"

"No, you must remember your wife . . ." But then his arms are around her, holding her in a strong grasp, and she must surrender . . .

Downstairs, in the silent black room on the second floor, the new tenant stirred. He dressed in his black robe and slippers, and went downstairs to sit upon the empty sofa in the dark, quiet parlor. He sent out his thoughts, met another's, and sighed. He fed.

Miss Bell took a sip of coffee, staring into the depths of the wallpaper. Had someone—Mrs. Fitchner, perhaps, seated opposite—asked her the color or pattern on the wall, she would have been unable to answer. Yet she had stared at that pattern daily for two years.

"Observation," the tall, thin man with the hawk nose says. "It was my powers of observation that allowed me to lead us around the marauders' camp. Yet first, I gathered clews that lead me to suspect that they, too, are headed for the Dalai Lama, and they can mean him only harm."

The lady seated across the fire smiles at him enigmatically; it reminds him of a painting by one of the old masters. He had thought at first that she was but another traveling Victorian spinster, and had cursed the fate that put him in this grave danger with only such an ally as she. But over the past forty-eight hours he has come to the disturbing conclusion that he really knows nothing at all about her. His mind is a well-oiled machine; he does not like it disturbed by women.

"I have made observations as well," she says, suddenly pulling a derringer from her sleeve and aiming it at him. He is disturbed further in that he never suspected she carried a weapon, realizing also that she appears to know how to use it. Her air of foolishness and naivety is dissolving in the wisps of smoke from the campfire.

"I observe," she continues, "that you have an impeccable Oxbridge accent, and that your shag tobacco is from a London tobacconist, whose firm I might venture to name. You, sir, are no Norwegian explorer!"

She levels the pistol at his heart. "Who are you, and what evil do you intend to the Dalai Lama?"

"It's migraine weather."

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Snapping out of her reverie, Miss Bell—in her daydreams, she uses the exciting name "Vita"—looked at her landlady. "I beg your pardon?"

"I can feel a headache coming on. Maybe it's because my mind was so unsettled last night. Try and try, I was just too upset to sleep."

She leaned in conspiratorially. "I'll tell you about it, dear. You were aware that I used to be a chorine?"

Vita nodded. With the posters and photographs that cluttered the common rooms, one could hardly be unaware of Mrs. Fitchner's career.

"I even did a screen test, once. If I hadn't married Mr. Fitchner, it might have been me up there in the movies, not Ginger Rogers.

"I tell you what I do. Sometimes at night, I just lie there and think about the dances. I see myself with Fred Astaire, and we're doing the most fantastic routines. Or I imagine a big Busby Berkeley number.

"Last night I was thinking about *Pennies from Heaven,* choreographing it with forty girls in raincoats and thirty-nine men with umbrellas, when Poof! It's gone! I can't remember the dance steps, the rhythm falls apart, even the damn lyrics are gone."

Vita buried her nose in her coffee mug. "That's weird," she muttered noncommittally.

Mrs. Allison was watching her stories when she heard the soft footfall on the stairs. She was almost alone in the house; it could only have been the mysterious new tenant, headed into the kitchen. Turning, she saw only the door swinging shut. Then she bent back toward the television.

Dr. Brett Point was trapped in a cabin on the edge of the approaching glacier—trapped with his former lover (she had deceived him, the tramp), a rival surgeon (who had also stolen his first wife), and two strangers, one of whom had to be a member of the anarchist conspiracy.

"We're doomed unless we can discern who is responsible, and make him help us," the rival surgeon hissed to Dr. Point.

"You fool," Brett replied. "They're all fanatics in that group. They'd gladly die to prevent us from returning with the vaccine."

She was concentrating on the adorable way his jaw muscles were twitching when she heard the kitchen door swinging open. Spinning about, she just caught a glimpse of the new tenant's foot, as he disappeared onto the second floor landing.

Had she been more prone to fantasy, Mrs. Allison might have wondered if the new tenant wished to avoid being seen; whether he might be a fugitive, or a lottery winner in hiding, or, as Ricky would have it, a vampire. Maybe even something exciting, like an actor hiding from his public . . .

Mrs. Allison was not prone to fantasy. It did, however, cross her mind

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momentarily that he might be the smallpox-carrying spy for whom Dr. Brett Point was searching.

Ricky went to the video store and rented seven vampire movies.

"We don't have a VCR," he remarked to his voice.

From somewhere behind and above him, the voice replied, *"We don't need one. Just sleep with them under your pillow tonight."*

Ricky nodded sagely. He felt good, doing research, working to defeat the enemy that lurked within his house.

When all was quiet and dark; when the city began to run down like a tired windup toy, the streets to empty and the lights to dim; then the new tenant would leave his room. He would walk to the kitchen and look into the refrigerator and the cupboards, but never find what he would need.

Then he would go into the parlor and sit before the television set, tuned to a station that had gone to bed. Lit by the sparkles of the static, the tenant would let his mind wander. The vampire would feed.

Trudy lay in bed, thinking how much the curlers hurt. She didn't know who had invented hair rollers, but surely they had never tried to sleep while wearing them. Still, one had to look one's best . . .

"You look beautiful, darling." The Count stares deep into her eyes, over the candlelit table.

"You said you were taking me to dinner. Not at your apartment."

He claps his hands, and liveried servants begin to carry in a horrendously expensive meal, with a menu she has heard of only in stories. Coq au vin. Bouillabaise. Crepes Suzette. Expensive champagne flows like water, and under one covered dish (the service is pure gold) she finds a diamond necklace with a ruby pendant.

"The ruby is the color of passion," the Count whispers, helping her with the clasp. The servants disappear unobtrusively. He puts his firm arms about her, his handsome (though foreign) face close to hers, and says "Give me a blow job."

"What?" *She is taken totally aback.*

"You're right, that wasn't the correct suggestion," says the Count, and he proceeds to tie her up, naked on the cold floor, and then *insist on fellatio. The servants return in order to watch and snicker at her discomfort. To cap it, he dumps cooking oil on her, and threatens her with a lit match . . .*

Trudy sat straight up in bed, shaking her head as if to remove the thoughts.

"What the hell?"

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Ricky waited until Tom had gone off to school, then took the subway down to Times Square. The last time he'd been there, he'd seen a few folks he'd known from the hospital. He hoped to locate one of them now.

He found her hunting through a garbage bin.

"Brenda?"

She looked at him, pausing with her head slightly cocked, listening as her voices advised her. Ricky found it comforting sometimes to be around others who were tuned in to the Otherworld, but usually he just wished the voices could talk amongst themselves without insisting on human go-betweens. Sometimes it could be very demeaning, being your voice's voice.

"Ricky?"

"Right. Ward E North. Brenda, remember the spook in the men's room?"

She nodded. She had exorcised it by saving up her Haldol (Brenda was so good at pretending to swallow her pills that patients sometimes paid her a carton of cigarettes each to learn her technique), grinding it up, and spreading it all over the lavatory. No ghost could stand up to the most powerful neuroleptic.

"Well, I've got a vampire in my boarding house. What can I do?"

Shaking her head, she returned to the garbage. "Don't know about vampires."

"But you know about ghosts . . ."

"Martians, too. And Vulcans." She looked back up at him. "Dirty space people, trying to put their thoughts into our heads. Stealing our thoughts, too. But I get the best of them." Cackling, she untied the scarf and showed one end of it to Ricky.

"Lined with tin foil," she said proudly. "Gets 'em every time."

Dr. Brett Point sneaks into the room. "They're still out there," he whispers.

She should be afraid, what with spies all over outside, and the two of them trapped in the attic of the old house. Lord only knows what germs might be in the dust and spiderwebs. But how can she be afraid, when he is there? She snuggles closer, knowing that he will put his strong arm around her and hold her tight and then, caught up in the passion of the moment, will . . .

"Look," he says. "We have to discuss our relationship."

"What?" She tries to put her arm about him, but he brushes her aside with a look of distaste.

"Brett . . ."

"This can't go anywhere," he says coolly. "I'm a handsome, well-built

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doctor, and you're old and arthritic . . . and you know what? Your husband was right. *You're* stupid. *You wouldn't know a fact if it bit your nose off."*

She looks at him with the dumb, wide-eyed expression that her poodle used to wear, when she punished him. Like her poodle, she whines for affection. "Honey . . ."

He stands up and glares at her, enunciating very slowly. "You . . . make . . . me . . . sick."

Mrs. Fitchner became concerned after she'd missed two meals. Mrs. Allison seldom missed meals, with the chance to discuss her stories with the landlady. Tom and Vita would think their own thoughts, Trudy would occasionally try to change the subject to movie stars or prime-time television, and Ricky would listen very, very carefully, occasionally demanding clarification.

Once, right before a return to the hospital, he had confided in Tom that the secrets of the universe were being encoded numerologically in soap opera scripts, to be transmitted to him by the conversation of Mrs. Allison and Mrs. Fitchner. Tom, as usual, had been skeptical.

After lunch, a meal usually attended only by Ricky and the two widows, Mrs. Fitchner said, "We'd better see if she's all right."

"Don't do it," said Ricky's voice.

"I'll stay here," Ricky said.

"No, she may be ill. I might need your help."

She took him by the arm, almost propelling him up the stairs.

"She's gone to the other dimension, to the Twilight Zone where the Vulcans and the friendly Martians play jai alai and eat Cheese-Whiz," he repeated from his voice, growing into a panic. He had a good idea that they'd open the door and find the old woman lying in a pool of blood and entrails, with cockroaches supping, and fire-eyed rats and spiders building a temple to their vampire god from her remains.

Actually, all they found was Mrs. Allison's body, cold and pale like a waxwork, lying on her bed; an empty bottle of antidepressants clenched in one fist, a rhinestone dog collar in the other.

Mrs. Fitchner screamed (though she'd been half-expecting it) and ran into the hallway, knocking madly on doors. "Come quick, she's dead!"

There was silence from the empty rooms, until she came to the new tenant's.

"Go away," a voice called from within. "I'm trying to sleep."

Mrs. Fitchner finally summoned the proper authorities, and left the final arrangements in the hands of Tom. "I'm going to Florida," she said, and was packed and gone by early morning.

No one slept much that night.

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* * *

Seduced and abandoned, her job lost to the vengeful Count's lies, her hometown firebombed so she could not return; Trudy walks the cold alleyways, prey to all the human scum and garbage of the city. Inside her, the evil man's fetus grows, vampirically stealing her health and looks. She stops to scratch, and notices a violaceous patch of diseased skin on her emaciated leg.

"Shit, he gave me AIDS, too," she moans.

Mrs. Fitchner sent a postcard of her motel, pastel and art-deco. "It looks like something out of 'Miami Vice,' " Trudy remarked.

The postcard read: "Weather lovely; can choreograph again." No one quite knew what it meant, but Ricky's voice said it was significant.

Sometimes, when the new tenant sat in the parlor and watched the electrons dance along the screen, Ricky would sneak to the head of the stairs and watch him. All he could see was the dark, expressionless back, but Ricky knew that something was up.

You don't have to be paranoid to know when something is dangerous, but sometimes it helps.

It had not been easy killing an entire platoon of storm-troopers, and the man in black is exhausted by the time he returns to the schoolbus full of frightened Finnish schoolgirls.

"I'm bushed," he says, slumping down onto a seat beside the red-haired girl, and chugalugging from his canteen. "Totally beat."

"So?" she asks.

He has a moment's surprise—rare for a man of his unflappable, wellnigh infallible nature. "Well . . ."

"Let me answer," says the pudgy girl in the back row who always gets As. "Mr. Macho here just wiped out a shitload of subhuman Nazi rats, and he figured we'd all be so grateful we'd rape him in unison. Right, scuzbo?"

"Oh, gross," the girls chorus.

"Gag me," says the redhead. "Who'd want to sleep with this wimp?"

"I bet he's got pimples on his back."

"I bet he's got pimples on his ass."

The pudgy girl finishes with, "I know, let's all have an orgy and do kinky things. And we won't even let him watch."

They all stick out their tongues at him.

Tom screamed, picked up his unread book, and threw it across the room. It knocked into a row of books, sending them tumbling to the floor.

In the next room Ricky lay on the floor, ear to the rug, listening to the

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apartment below him, trying to hear the vampire feed. The sound of the books hitting the boards slammed into his ears like an earthquake, making him leap to his feet.

"Ignore it," suggested his voice. They had better things to do.

The Norwegian explorer—he was not really a Norwegian explorer, in truth he was a consulting detective, but she still thinks of him as the Norwegian explorer—helps her up the cliff and into the cave. They had been forced to abandon their supplies and weapons to the marauding Afghans below, and the Yeti had eaten their horses, but they were safe for the present. In the heat of battle she had felt dynamic, her plainness a mere illusion for the fires within.

A Jezail bullet had ripped through her sleeve, leaving only a flesh wound, but she knows he is concerned. When she was shot, and had fallen from the sheer momentum of the bullet slamming into her (though it did little harm), he had turned pale and his face had looked bereft, as if her death would signal the ending of all that he might desire.

"Don't be silly," she thinks to herself. "We're just good friends."

Still, she lets him examine her wound, though it means removing her blouse. She holds a blanket about herself, and knows that his fingers linger overlong on her flesh as he cleans the scrape.

His hands creep sensuously along her arm, over the curve of her shoulder, grasping the edge of the blanket, pulling it away . . .

"You bitch!" he shrieks. "This is my blanket. Get your hands off it."

"But . . ."

"And don't think to pull your derringer on me; I unloaded it last night while I was pretending to stare into your eyes. You're so feeble-minded. Making a fuss over a scratch like this?" He begins to chuckle, his chuckles becoming loud laughter.

"Thinking I might love or want you? Believe me, if I thought any woman were good enough for me, it would be someone a lot more intelligent and beautiful than you. *You are a pitiful, unattractive excuse for a human being, for a woman!"*

The Norwegian explorer stalks from the cave, leaving her.

She is alone.

Only Ricky seemed to be hungry. They'd been eating cold cereal or peanut butter sandwiches since Mrs. Fitchner left, but today Ricky had prepared a breakfast treat: frozen pizza. The others picked at their meal, pleased to have hot food for once, but devoid of appetite.

"Life sucks," Vita muttered.

"What?" The others looked up.

"Nothing." She blushed.

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"No, I agree," Tom said.

"Me too," added Trudy.

"It's just . . . " Vita waved her hands. "Ricky, you have weird thoughts, don't you?"

"No," he said, offended at the mere implication.

She continued, "It's like these . . . daydreams I used to have, have gotten totally out of control. They're awful, but I can't think of anything else."

Ricky nodded sagely.

"They used to be beautiful daydreams, full of, well, excitement, romance—full of life. Now it's as if only the bad parts remain."

Ricky said, "Maybe the good parts are being stolen."

"Huh?"

Trudy asked, "Like someone's going into our heads and taking out all the good stuff?"

He nodded enthusiastically. Maybe, for once, they'd understand.

"That's ridiculous," the women chorused. Miss Bell even closed her book for a moment.

"Ignore him," Tom said. "Thought insertion and thought withdrawal are just symptoms of schizophrenia."

"It's the vampire," he insisted. "The vampire steals your dreams."

The others sighed, and returned to staring individually at their breakfasts. *Vampires?* they thought.

Ricky finally couldn't stand it anymore. "Well, if you don't want your pizza, I do. I've got a lot to do today."

She is awakened from her sound sleep by the Count; he has changed, become his real self. Still attractive, he is older, with an aquiline nose and black hair that shines like patent leather. He wears formal evening garb, and medallions that carry commendations in unpronounceable tongues.

"Will you look at the time?" she mumbles.

"There will be all of eternity," he replies with his unplaceable foreign accent, enfolding her in his opera cape. She feels his lips soft against her throat, feels the tiny bite. She moans, and keeps him with her until morning, when she pulls open the blinds and the warm yellow light falls upon him.

"Betrayal!" he shrieks, trying to block the rays with his cape. But the sunlight washes over his features and he becomes first a corpse, then a skeleton, then a tenacious red dust that settles upon the carpet in vast quantities.

Trudy surveys the ruin upon the floor.

"Men!" she says scathingly. "Guess who's left to clean up the mess."

* * *

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The man before the sputtering television stirred, rubbing his temples for a moment, then returned to the hunt.

The tall man in black flees the bus. He had left the schoolgirls so young, so innocent, so full of the bloom of life. When he'd returned, it was to find them changed, perverted, the pale cold walking dead. A vampire had come upon them while he was gone, murdering them, turning them into grinning parodies of themselves. Even now, as he runs, he can hear the sounds of their unholy lusts and practices.

The entire Nazi regiment is also rising from the dead, but he fights his way through the mindless corpses until he reaches a castle, looming black upon the hill. The drawbridge is down and he enters, passing unmolested into its depths.

There in a throne room he finds the vampire; huge, an unshapen ugly mass of glowing protoplasm, oozing blood and slime. It cackles as he approaches, and he knows it for what it was: a good man once, but transformed into nameless evil by Nazi science.

"Find peace!" he screams, lobbing a grenade into it. Just to be sure, he has carved a cross onto the weapon. The monster explodes, splattering everything with the blood of dead virgins. The castle begins to shake, preparing to fall. As he runs, narrowly escaping its collapse, he sees the valley below him, with the bus and the dead regiment, burst into healing flames.

Downstairs in the parlor, the new tenant squirmed upon the overstuffed couch. Twice vampires died. What was he, to let such images unnerve him? Now famished, he brushed aside the thought of himself, lying cold and grim in an unmarked grave, and sought his dinner.

Despite her fury, Vita cannot let the Norwegian explorer go. The night is too dangerous for anyone to be alone. She follows him, finding easily the trail of his passage over the rocks and shrubs, coming all too soon to a vast gingerbread mansion high upon the mountain. She pauses only long enough to build a weapon from a sapling and some twine.

Entering, she follows the lush halls deep within the house, lined with ancient portraits of handsome noblemen, pausing only at the parlor. There is her explorer, on his knees, trying to avert his gaze from the apparition before him.

It is a man, a tall man, dwarfing the explorer, even as the explorer dwarfs Vita. His face is cold, with a noble profile and a supercilious gaze. A dark cape hangs loosely from his shoulders. He has an inhuman appeal; just looking at him, Vita can imagine his cruel grip about her, the passion of the bite, his indifference when she dies in his arms. And yet she wants

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it . . . The blackness, the eternity of the grave, the dread and beautiful aloneness . . .

The Norwegian explorer must want it also, for he has risen to his feet. The vampire holds up one hand, beckoning, commanding—The Englishman begins to stumble towards him.

"Obey me; come," says the vampire, with a deep, resonant, beautiful voice and an upper-class British accent.

"Hey, turkeys," she calls with false bravado. They turn to her. The vampire's expression is one of pleasure. "Come to me," he repeats, now for her benefit.

"Eat wood," she replies, raising her weapon, a quickly constructed bow and arrow. It flies true; sapling oak thrusts into his heart and the vampire falls.

"I could have offered you all that you ever will desire," he chokes, and dies.

The Norwegian explorer stands, nonplussed at the somewhat odd turn of events. Finally he says, "I owe . . . "

"Oh, stuff it," she says. It's been a long night and she is tired. "Maybe you're smarter and braver and better looking than I'll ever be, but you're also a real asshole."

With a scream of rage, the vampire tenant flew up the stairs to his room. Alone—he must be alone, to drive out these thoughts. Light and flame and wood assailed him, reverberating through his mind.

Gasping, he shut the door, locking himself into his sanctum. He will lie down, compose his mind, think restful thoughts, and then sleep. Tomorrow he can feed. Tomorrow . . .

The tenant screamed again, as his restless thoughts refused to be quieted. Instead, they almost seemed to fly about the room, to bounce off the ceiling and the walls and return to him, caroming off the furniture and into his mind like phantom billiard balls of light.

Light and flame and wood . . .

"Man, it's too much for me," Trudy said. "Two dead bodies in one week, and pizza for breakfast."

"I thought you liked sausage," Ricky complained. His voice said, *"What did you expect, gratitude?"*

"I think," Trudy continued, "that I'll move to California. Everyone's blonde and says 'Have a nice day' there."

"Good luck," Tom muttered absently. He was busy staring across the table at Vita. He'd never quite noticed it before, but she looked almost dynamic when she stared, totally spaced out, into the pink and yellow flowers of the wallpaper.

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Vita, meanwhile, had a lot to think about as she stared through the pattern. She was thinking how Tom's hand had brushed hers accidentally as he reached across the table for the milk carton. She wondered if it might happen again. Maybe she would ask if he'd like to stay up and watch the old Basil Rathbone movie with her tonight.

"You know, the one thing I just don't understand," Trudy finished, "is why the guy had tinfoil covering his entire room. Kind of weird, you know?"

There was no more vampire downstairs, but Ricky had to leave. He had to check into the hospital for a couple of weeks.

After all, he'd spent all his money on aluminum foil, and hadn't any more to live on until the first of the month.

It wouldn't be very pleasant; they'd give him powerful medicine and his voice would go away for a while, leaving him all alone in a strange place. But he could take it. He was strong. He was a vampire killer. He was a hero.

"That's gratitude for you," his voice muttered. Sometimes it just doesn't pay to be helpful. ●

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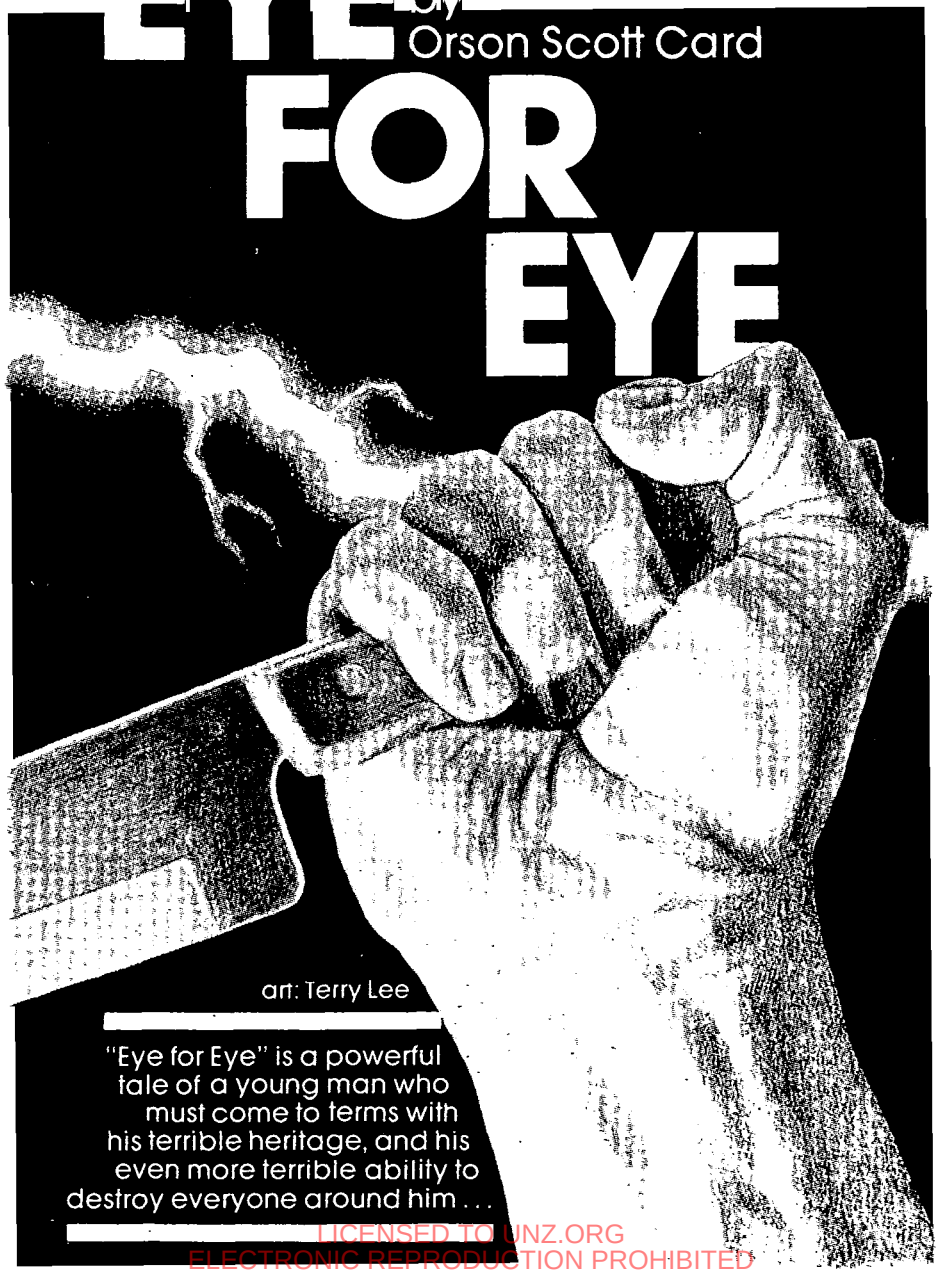
EYE for EYE

by Orson Scott Card



art: Terry Lee

"Eye for Eye" is a powerful tale of a young man who must come to terms with his terrible heritage, and his even more terrible ability to destroy everyone around him . . .

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Just talk, Mick. Tell us everything. We'll listen.

Well to start with I know I was doing terrible things. If you're a halfway decent person, you don't go looking to kill people. Even if you can do it without touching them. Even if you can do it so as nobody even guesses they was murdered, you still got to try not to do it.

Who taught you that?

Nobody. I mean it wasn't in the books in the Baptist Sunday School—they spent all their time telling us not to lie or break the sabbath or drink liquor. Never did mention killing. Near as I can figure, the Lord thought killing was pretty smart sometimes, like when Samson done it with a donkey's jaw. A thousand guys dead, but that was okay cause they was Philistines. And lighting foxes' tails on fire. Samson was a sicko, but he still got his pages in the Bible.

I figure Jesus was about the only guy got much space in the Bible telling people not to kill. And even then, there's that story about how the Lord struck down a guy and his wife cause they held back on their offerings to the Christian church. Oh, Lord, the TV preachers did go on about that. No, it wasn't cause I got religion that I figured out not to kill people.

You know what I think it was? I think it was Vondel Cone's elbow. At the Baptist Children's Home in Eden, North Carolina, we played basketball all the time. On a bumpy dirt court, but we figured it was part of the game, never knowing which way the ball would bounce. Those boys in the NBA, they play a sissy game on that flat smooth floor.

We played basketball because there wasn't a lot else to do. Only thing they ever had on TV was the preachers. We got it all cabled in—Falwell from up in Lynchburg, Jim and Tammy from Charlotte, Jimmy Swaggart looking hot, Ernest Ainglee looking carpeted, Billy Graham looking like God's executive vice-president—that was all our TV ever showed, so no wonder we lived on the basketball court all year.

Anyway, Vondel Cone wasn't particularly tall and he wasn't particularly good at shooting and on the court nobody was even halfway good at dribbling. But he had elbows. Other guys, when they hit you it was an accident. But when Vondel's elbow met up with your face, he like to pushed your nose out your ear. You can bet we all learned real quick to give him room. He got to take all the shots and get all the rebounds he wanted.

But we got even. We just didn't count his points. We'd call out the score, and any basket he made it was like it never happened. He'd scream and he'd argue and we'd all stand there and nod and agree so he wouldn't punch us out, and then as soon as the next basket was made, we'd call out the score—still not counting Vondel's points. Drove that boy crazy.

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He screamed till his eyes bugged out, but nobody ever counted his cheating points.

Vondel died of leukemia at the age of fourteen. You see, I never did like that boy.

But I learned something from him. I learned how unfair it was for somebody to get his way just because he didn't care how much he hurt other people. And when I finally realized that I was just about the most hurtful person in the whole world, I knew then and there that it just wasn't right. I mean, even in the Old Testament, Moses said the punishment should fit the crime. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Even Steven, that's what Old Peleg said before I killed him of prostate cancer. It was when Peleg got took to the hospital that I left the Eden Baptist Children's Home. Cause I wasn't Vondel. I *did* care how much I hurt folks.

But that doesn't have nothing to do with anything. I don't know what all you want me to talk about.

Just talk, Mick. Tell us whatever you want.

Well I don't aim to tell you my whole life story. I mean I didn't really start to figure out anything till I got on that bus in Roanoke, and so I can pretty much start there I guess. I remember being careful not to get annoyed when the lady in front of me didn't have the right change for the bus. And I didn't get angry when the bus driver got all snotty and told the lady to get off. It just wasn't worth killing for. That's what I always tell myself when I get mad. It isn't worth killing for, and it helps me calm myself down. So anyway I reached past her and pushed a dollar bill through the slot.

"This is for both of us," I says.

"I don't make change," says he.

I could've just said "Fine" and left it at that, but he was being such a prick that I had to do something to make him see how ignorant he was. So I put another nickel in the slot and said, "That's thirty-five for me, thirty-five for her, and thirty-five for the next guy gets on without no change."

So maybe I provoked him. I'm sorry for that, but I'm human, too, I figure. Anyway he was mad. "Don't you smart off with me, boy. I don't have to let you ride, fare or no fare."

Well, fact was he did, that's the law, and anyway I was white and my hair was short so his boss would probably do something if I complained. I could have told him what for and shut his mouth up tight. Except that if I did, I would have gotten too mad, and no man deserves to die just for being a prick. So I looked down at the floor and said, "Sorry, sir." I didn't say "Sorry *sir*" or anything snotty like that. I said it all quiet and sincere.

If he just *dropped* it, everything would have been fine, you know? I was mad, yes, but I'd gotten okay at bottling it in, just kind of holding

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it tight and then waiting for it to ooze away where it wouldn't hurt nobody. But just as I turned to head back toward a seat, he lurched that bus forward so hard that it flung me down and I only caught myself from hitting the floor by catching the handhold on a seatback and half-smashing the poor lady sitting there.

Some other people said, "Hey!" kind of mad, and I realize now that they was saying it to the driver, cause they was on my side. But at the time I thought they was mad at *me*, and that plus the scare of nearly falling and how mad I already was, well, I lost control of myself. I could just feel it in me, like sparklers in my blood veins, spinning around my whole body and then throwing off this pulse that went and hit that bus driver. He was behind me, so I didn't see it with my eyes. But I could feel that sparkiness connect up with him, and twist him around inside, and then finally it came loose from me, I didn't feel it no more. I wasn't mad no more. But I knew I'd done him already.

I even knew where. It was in his liver. I was a real expert on cancer by now. Hadn't I seen everybody I ever knew die of it? Hadn't I read every book in the Eden Public Library on cancer? You can live without kidneys, you can cut out a lung, you can take out a colon and live with a bag in your pants, but you can't live without a liver and they can't transplant it either. That man was dead. Two years at the most, I gave him. Two years, all because he was in a bad mood and lurched his bus to trip up a smartmouth kid.

I felt like piss on a flat rock. On that day I had gone nearly eight months, since before Christmas, the whole *year* so far without hurting anybody. It was the best I'd ever done, and I thought I'd licked it. I stepped across the lady I smashed into and sat by the window, looking out, not seeing anything. All I could think was I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry. Did he have a wife and kids? Well, they'd be a widow and orphans soon enough, because of me. I could feel him from clear over here. The sparkiness of his belly, making the cancer grow and keeping his body's own natural fire from burning it out. I wanted with all my heart to take it back, but I couldn't. And like so many times before, I thought to myself that if I had any guts I'd kill myself. I couldn't figure why I hadn't died of my own cancer already. I sure enough hated myself a lot worse than I ever hated anybody else.

The lady beside me starts to talk. "People like that are so annoying, aren't they?"

I didn't want to talk to anybody, so I just grunted and turned away.

"That was very kind of you to help me," she says.

That's when I realized she was the same lady who didn't have the right fare. "Nothing," I says.

"No, you didn't have to do that." She touched my jeans.

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I turned to look at her. She was older, about twenty-five maybe, and her face looked kind of sweet. She was dressed nice enough that I could tell it wasn't cause she was poor that she didn't have bus fare. She also didn't take her hand off my knee, which made me nervous, because the bad thing I do is a lot stronger when I'm actually touching a person, and so I mostly don't touch folks and I don't feel safe when they touch me. The fastest I ever killed a man was when he felt me up in a bathroom at a rest stop on I-85. He was coughing blood when I left that place, I really tore him up that time, I still have nightmares about him gasping for breath there with his hand on me.

So anyway that's why I felt real nervous her touching me there on the bus, even though there was no harm in it. Or anyway that's half why I was nervous, and the other half was that her hand was real light on my leg and out of the corner of my eye I could see how her chest moved when she breathed, and after all I'm seventeen and normal most ways. So when I wished she'd move her hand, I only *half* wished she'd move it back to her own lap.

That was up till she smiles at me and says, "Mick, I want to help you."

It took me a second to realize she spoke my name. I didn't know many people in Roanoke, and she sure wasn't one of them. Maybe she was one of Mr. Kaiser's customers, I thought. But they hardly ever knew my name. I kind of thought, for a second, that maybe she had seen me working in the warehouse and asked Mr. Kaiser all about me or something. So I says, "Are you one of Mr. Kaiser's customers?"

"Mick Winger," she says. "You got your first name from a note pinned to your blanket when you were left at the door of the sewage plant in Eden. You chose your last name when you ran away from the Eden Baptist Children's Home, and you probably chose it because the first movie you ever saw was *An Officer and a Gentleman*. You were fifteen then, and now you're seventeen, and you've killed more people in your life than Al Capone."

I got nervous when she knew my whole name and how I got it, cause the only way she could know that stuff was if she'd been following me for years. But when she let on she knew I killed people, I forgot all about feeling mad or guilty or horny. I pulled the cord on the bus, practically crawled over her to get out, and in about three seconds I was off that bus and hit the ground running. I'd been afraid of it for years, somebody finding out about me. But it was all the more scary seeing how she must have known about me for so *long*. It made me feel like somebody'd been peeking in the bathroom window all my life and I only just now found out about it.

I ran for a long time, which isn't easy because of all the hills in Roanoke. I ran mostly downhill, though, into town, where I could dodge into build-

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ings and out their back doors. I didn't know if she was following me, but she'd been following me for a long time, or someone had, and I never even guessed it, so how did I know if they was following me now or not?

And while I ran, I tried to figure where I could go now. I had to leave town, that was sure. I couldn't go back to the warehouse, not even to say good-bye, and that made me feel real bad, cause Mr. Kaiser would think I just run off for no reason, like some kid who didn't care nothing about people counting on him. He might even worry about me, never coming to pick up my spare clothes from the room he let me sleep in.

Thinking about what Mr. Kaiser might think about me going was pretty strange. Leaving Roanoke wasn't ging to be like leaving the orphanage, and then leaving Eden, and finally leaving North Carolina. I never had much to let go of in those places. But Mr. Kaiser had always been real straight with me, a nice steady old guy, never bossed me, never tried to take me down, even stuck up for me in a quiet kind of way by letting it be known that he didn't want nobody teasing me. Hired me a year and a half ago, even though I was lying about being sixteen and he must've known it. And in all that time, I never once got mad at work, or at least not so mad I couldn't stop myself from hurting people. I worked hard, built up muscles I never thought I'd have, and I also must've grown five inches, my pants kept getting so short. I sweated and I ached most days after work, but I earned my pay and kept up with the older guys, and Mr. Kaiser never once made me feel like he took me on for charity, the way the orphanage people always did, like I should thank them for not letting me starve. Kaiser's Furniture Warehouse was the first peaceful place I ever spent time, the first place where nobody died who was my fault.

I knew all that before, but right till I started running I never realized how bad I'd feel about leaving Roanoke. Like somebody dying. It got so bad that for a while I couldn't hardly see which way I was going, not that I out and out cried or nothing.

Pretty soon I found myself walking down Jefferson Street, where it cuts through a woody hill before it widens out for car dealers and Burger Kings. There was cars passing me both ways, but I was thinking about other things now. Trying to figure why I never got mad at Mr. Kaiser. Other people treated me nice before, it wasn't like I got beat up every night or nobody ever gave me seconds or I had to eat dogfood or nothing. I remembered all those people at the orphanage, they was just trying to make me grow up Christian and educated. They just never learned how to be nice without also being nasty. Like Old Peleg, the black caretaker, he was a nice old coot and told us stories, and I never let nobody call him nigger even behind his back. But he was a racist himself, and I knew it on account of the time he caught me and Jody Capel practicing who could

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stop pissing the most times in a single go. We both done the same thing, didn't we? But he just sent me off and then started whaling on Jody, and Jody was yelling like he was dying, and I kept saying, "It ain't fair! I done it too! You're only beating on him cause he's black!" but he paid no mind, it was so crazy, I mean it wasn't like I wanted him to beat me too, but it made me so *mad* and before I knew it, I felt so sparky that I couldn't hold it in and I was hanging on him, trying to pull him away from Jody, so it hit him hard.

What could I say to him then? Going into the hospital, where he'd lie there with a tube in his arm and a tube in his nose sometimes. He told me stories when he could talk, and just squoze my hand when he couldn't. He used to have a belly on him, but I think I could have tossed him in the air like a baby before he died. And I did it to him, not that I meant to, I couldn't help myself, but that's the way it was. Even people I purely loved, they'd have mean days, and God help them if I happened to be there, because I was like God with a bad mood, that's what I was, God with no mercy, because I couldn't give them nothing, but I sure as hell could take away. Take it all away. They told me I shouldn't visit Old Peleg so much cause it was sick to keep going to watch him waste away. Mrs. Howard and Mr. Dennis both got tumors from trying to get me to stop going. So many people was dying of cancer in those days they came from the county and tested the water for chemicals. It wasn't no chemicals, I knew that, but I never did tell them, cause they'd just lock me up in the crazy house and you can bet that crazy house would have a *epidemic* before I been there a week if that ever happened.

Truth was I didn't know, I just didn't know it was me doing it for the longest time. It's just people kept dying on me, everybody I ever loved, and it seemed like they always took sick after I'd been real mad at them once, and you know how little kids always feel guilty about yelling at somebody who dies right after. The counselor even told me that those feelings were perfectly natural, and of course it wasn't my fault, but I couldn't shake it. And finally I began to realize that other people didn't feel that sparky feeling like I did, and they couldn't tell how folks was feeling unless they looked or asked. I mean, I knew when my lady teachers was going to be on the rag before *they* did, and you can bet I stayed away from them the best I could on those crabby days. I could feel it, like they was giving off sparks. And there was other folks who had a way of sucking you to them, without saying a thing, without doing a thing, you just went into a room and couldn't take your eyes off them, you wanted to be close—I saw that other kids felt the same way, just automatically liked them, you know? But I could feel it like they was on fire, and suddenly I was cold and needed to warm myself. And I'd say something about it and people would look at me like I was crazy enough

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to lock right up, and I finally caught on that I was the only one that had those feelings.

Once I knew that, then all those deaths began to fit together. All those cancers, those days they lay in hospital beds turning into mummies before they was rightly dead, all the pain until they drugged them into zombies so they wouldn't tear their own guts out just trying to get to the place that hurt so bad. Torn up, cut up, drugged up, radiated, bald, skinny, praying for death, and I knew I did it. I began to tell the minute I did it. I began to know what kind of cancer it would be, and where, and how bad. And I was always right.

Twenty-five people I knew of, and probably more I didn't.

And it got even worse when I ran away. I'd hitch rides because how else was I going to get anywheres? But I was always scared of the people who picked me up, and if they got weird or anything I sparked them. And cops who run me out of a place, they got it. Until I figured I was just Death himself, with his bent-up spear and a hood over his head, walking around and whoever came near him bought the farm. That was me. I was the most terrible thing in the world, I was families broke up and children orphaned and mamas crying for their dead babies, I was everything that people hate most in all the world. I jumped off a overpass once to kill myself but I just sprained my ankle. Old Peleg always said I was like a cat, I wouldn't die lessen somebody skinned me, roasted the meat and ate it, then tanned the hide, made it into slippers, wore them slippers clean out, and then burned them and raked the ashes, that's when I'd finally die. And I figure he's right, cause I'm still alive and that's a plain miracle after the stuff I been through lately.

Anyway that's the kind of thing I was thinking, walking along Jefferson, when I noticed that a car had driven by going the other way and saw me and turned around and came back up behind me, pulled ahead of me and stopped. I was so spooked I thought it must be that lady finding me again, or maybe somebody with guns to shoot me all up like on "Miami Vice," and I was all set to take off up the hill till I saw it was just Mr. Kaiser.

He says, "I was heading the other way, Mick. Want a ride to work?"

I couldn't tell him what I was doing. "Not today, Mr. Kaiser," I says.

Well, he knew by my look or something, cause he says, "You quitting on me, Mick?"

I was just thinking, don't argue with me or nothing, Mr. Kaiser, just let me go, I don't want to hurt you, I'm so fired up with guilt and hating myself that I'm just death waiting to bust out and blast somebody, can't you see sparks falling off me like spray off a wet dog? I just says, "Mr. Kaiser, I don't want to talk right now, I really don't."

Right then was the moment for him to push. For him to lecture me

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about how I had to learn responsibility, and if I didn't talk things through how could anybody ever make things right, and life ain't a free ride so sometimes you got to do things you don't want to do, and I been nicer to you than you deserve, you're just what they warned me you'd be, shiftless and ungrateful and a bum in your soul.

But he didn't say none of that. He just says, "You had some bad luck? I can advance you against wages, I know you'll pay back."

"I don't owe no money," I says.

And he says, "Whatever you're running away from, come home with me and you'll be safe."

What could I say? You're the one who needs protecting, Mr. Kaiser, and I'm the one who'll probably kill you. So I didn't say nothing, until finally he just nodded and put his hand on my shoulder and said, "That's okay, Mick. If you ever need a place or a job, you just come on back to me. You find a place to settle down for a while, you write to me and I'll send you your stuff."

"You just give it to the next guy," I says.

"A son-of-a-bitch stinking mean old Jew like me?" he says. "I don't give nothing to nobody."

Well I couldn't help but laugh, cause that's what the foreman always called Mr. Kaiser whenever he thought the old guy couldn't hear him. And when I laughed, I felt myself cool off, just like as if I had been on fire and somebody poured cold water over my head.

"Take care of yourself, Mick," he says. He give me his card and a twenty and tucked it into my pocket when I told him no. Then he got back into his car and made one of his insane U-turns right across traffic and headed back the other way.

Well if he did nothing else he got my brain back in gear. There I was walking along the highway where anybody at all could see me, just like Mr. Kaiser did. At least till I was out of town I ought to stay out of sight as much as I could. So there I was between those two hills, pretty steep, and all covered with green, and I figured I could climb either one. But the slope on the other side of the road looked somehow better to me, it looked more like I just ought to go there, and I figured that was as good a reason to decide as any I ever heard of, and so I dodged my way across Jefferson Street and went right into the kudzu caves and clawed my way right up. It was dark under the leaves, but it wasn't much cooler than right out in the sun, particularly cause I was working so hard. It was a long way up, and just when I got to the top the ground started shaking. I thought it was an earthquake I was so edgy, till I heard the train whistle and then I knew it was one of those coal-hauling trains, so heavy it could shake ivy off a wall when it passed. I just stood there and listened to it, the sound coming from every direction all at once, there under the

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kudzu, I listened till it went on by, and then I stepped out of the leaves into a clearing.

And there she was, waiting for me, sitting under a tree.

I was too wore out to run, and too scared, coming on her sudden like that, just when I thought I was out of sight. It was just as if I'd been aiming straight at her, all the way up the hill, just as if she somehow tied a string to me and pulled me across the street and up the hill. And if she could do that, how could I run away from her, tell me that? Where could I go? I'd just turn some corner and there she'd be, waiting. So I says to her, "All right, what do you want?"

She just waved me on over. And I went, too, but not very close, cause I didn't know what she had in mind. "Sit down, Mick," says she. "We need to talk."

Now I'll tell you that I didn't want to sit, and I didn't want to talk, I just wanted to get out of there. And so I did, or at least I thought I did. I started walking straight away from her, I thought, but in three steps I realized that I wasn't walking away, I was walking around her. Like that planet thing in science class, the more I moved, the more I got nowhere. It was like she had more say over what my legs did than me.

So I sat down.

"You shouldn't have run off from me," she says.

What I mostly thought of now was to wonder if she was wearing anything under that shirt. And then I thought, what a stupid time to be thinking about that. But I still kept thinking about it.

"Do you promise to stay right there till I'm through talking?" she says.

When she moved, it was like her clothes got almost transparent for a second, but not quite. Couldn't take my eyes off her. I promised.

And then all of a sudden she was just a woman. Not ugly, but not all that pretty, neither. Just looking at me with eyes like fire. I was scared again, and I wanted to leave, especially cause now I began to think she really was doing something to me. But I promised, so I stayed.

"That's how it began," she says.

"What's how what began?" says I.

"What you just felt. What I made you feel. That only works on people like you. Nobody else can feel it."

"Feel what?" says I. Now, I knew what she meant, but I didn't know for sure if she meant what I knew. I mean, it bothered me real bad that she could tell how I felt about her those few minutes there.

"Feel that," she says, and there it is again, all I can think about is her body. But it only lasted a few seconds, and then I knew for sure that she was doing it to me.

"Stop it," I says, and she says, "I already did."

I ask her, "How do you do that?"

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"Everybody can do it, just a little. A woman looks at a man, she's interested, and so the bio-electrical system heats up, causes some odors to change, and he smells them and notices her and he pays attention."

"Does it work the other way?"

"Men are always giving off those odors, Mick. Makes no difference. It isn't a man's stink that gives a woman her ideas. But like I said, Mick, that's what everybody can do. With some men, though, it isn't a woman's smell that draws his eye. It's the bio-electrical system itself. The smell is nothing. You can feel the heat of the fire. It's the same thing as when you kill people, Mick. If you couldn't kill people the way you do, you also couldn't feel it so strong when I give off magnetic pulses."

Of course I didn't understand all that the first time, and maybe I'm remembering it now with words she didn't teach me until later. At the time, though, I was scared, yes, because she knew, and because she could do things to me, but I was also excited, because she sounded like she had some answers, like she knew why it was that I killed people without meaning to.

But when I asked her to explain everything, she couldn't. "We're only just beginning to understand it ourselves, Mick. There's a Swedish scientist who is making some strides that way. We've sent some people over to meet with him. We've read his book, and maybe even some of us understand it. I've got to tell you, Mick, just because we can do this thing doesn't mean that we're particularly smart or anything. It doesn't get us through college any faster or anything. It just means that teachers who flunk us tend to die off a little younger."

"You're like me! You can do it too!"

She shook her head. "Not likely," she says. "If I'm really furious at somebody, if I really hate him, if I really *try*, and if I keep it up for weeks, I can maybe give him an ulcer. You're in a whole different league from me. You and your people."

"I got no people," I says.

"I'm here, Mick, because you got people. People who knew just exactly what you could do from the minute you were born. People who knew that if you didn't get a tit to suck you wouldn't just cry, you'd kill. Spraying out death from your cradle. So they planned it all from the beginning. Put you in an orphanage. Let other people, all those do-gooders, let them get sick and die, and then when you're old enough to have control over it, then they look you up, they tell you who you are, they bring you home to live with them."

"So you're my kin?" I ask her.

"Not so you'd notice," she says. "I'm here to warn you about your kin. We've been watching you for years, and now it's time to warn you."

"*Now* it's time? I spent fifteen years in that children's home killing

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everybody who ever cared about me, and if they'd just come along—or you, or anybody, if you just said, Mick, you got to control your temper or you'll hurt people, if somebody just said to me, Mick, we're your people and we'll keep you safe, then maybe I wouldn't be so scared all the time, maybe I wouldn't go killing people so much, did you ever think of that?" Or maybe I didn't say all that, but that's what I was feeling, and so I said a lot, I chewed her up and down.

And then I saw how scared she was, because I was all sparky, and I realized I was just about to shed a load of death onto her, and so I kind of jumped back and yelled at her to leave me alone, and then she does the craziest thing, she reaches out toward me, and I scream at her, "Don't you touch me!" cause if she touches me I can't hold it in, it'll just go all through her and tear up her guts inside, but she just keeps reaching, leaning toward me, and so I kind of crawled over toward a tree, and I hung onto that tree, I just held on and let the tree kind of soak up all my sparkiness, almost like I was burning up the tree. Maybe I killed it, for all I know. Or maybe it was so big, I couldn't hurt it, but it took all the fire out of me, and then she *did* touch me, like nobody ever touched me, her arm across my back, and hand holding my shoulder, her face right up against my ear, and she says to me, "Mick, you didn't hurt me."

"Just leave me alone," says I.

"You're not like them," she says. "Don't you see that? They love the killing. They *use* the killing. Only they're not as strong as you. They have to be touching, for one thing, or close to it. They have to keep it up longer. They're stronger than *I* am, but not as strong as you. So they'll want you, that's for sure, Mick, but they'll also be scared of you, and you know what'll scare them most? That you didn't kill me, that you can *control* it like that."

"I can't always. That bus driver today."

"So you're not perfect. But you're trying. Trying not to kill people. Don't you see, Mick? You're not like them. They may be your blood family, but you don't belong with them, and they'll see that, and when they do—"

All I could think about was what she said, my blood family. "My Mama and Daddy, you telling me I'm going to meet them?"

"They're calling you now, and that's why I had to warn you."

"Calling me?"

"The way I called you up this hill. Only it wasn't just me, of course, it was a bunch of us."

"I just decided to come up here, to get off the road."

"You just decided to cross the highway and climb this hill, instead of the other one? Anyway, that's how it works. It's part of the human race for all time, only we never knew it. A bunch of people kind of harmonize

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their bio-electrical systems, to call for somebody to come home, and they come home, after a while. Or sometimes a whole nation unites to hate somebody. Like Iran and the Shah, or the Philippines and Marcos."

"They just kicked them out," I says.

"But they were already dying, weren't they? A whole nation, hating together, they make a constant interference with their enemy's bio-electrical system. A constant noise. All of them together, millions of people, they are finally able to match what you can do with one flash of anger."

I thought about that for a few minutes, and it came back to me all the times I thought how I wasn't even human. So maybe I *was* human, after all, but human like a guy with three arms is human, or one of those guys in the horror movies I saw, gigantic and lumpy and going around hacking up teenagers whenever they was about to get laid. And in all those movies they always try to kill the guy only they can't, he gets stabbed and shot and burned up and he still comes back, and that's like me, I must have tried to kill myself so many times only it never worked.

No. Wait a minute.

I got to get this straight, or you'll think I'm crazy or a liar. I didn't jump off that highway overpass like I said. I stood on one for a long time, watching the cars go by. Whenever a big old semi came along I'd say, this one, and I'd count, and at the right second I'd say, now. Only I never did jump. And then afterward I dreamed about jumping, and in all those dreams I'd just bounce off the truck and get up and limp away. Like the time I was a kid and sat in the bathroom with the little gardening shears, the spring-loaded kind that popped open, I sat there thinking about jamming it into my stomach right under the breastbone, and then letting go of the handle, it'd pop right open and make a bad wound and cut open my heart or something. I was there so long I fell asleep on the toilet, and later I dreamed about doing it but no blood ever came out, because I couldn't die.

So I never tried to kill myself. But I thought about it all the time. I was like those monsters in those movies, just killing people but secretly hoping somebody would catch on to what was going on and kill me first.

And so I says to her, "Why didn't you just kill me?"

And there she was with her face close to mine and she says, just like it was love talk, she says, "I've had you in my rifle sights, Mick, and then I didn't do it. Because I saw something in you. I saw that maybe you were trying to control it. That maybe you didn't want to use your power to kill. And so I let you live, thinking that one day I'd be here like this, telling you what you are, and giving you a little hope."

I thought she meant I'd hope because of knowing my Mama and Daddy were alive and wanted me.

"I hoped for a long time, but I gave it up. I don't want to see my Mama

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and Daddy, if they could leave me there all those years. I don't want to see you, neither, if you didn't so much as warn me not to get mad at Old Peleg. I didn't want to kill Old Peleg, and I couldn't even help it! You didn't help me a bit!"

"We argued about it," she says. "We knew you were killing people while you tried to sort things out and get control. Puberty's the worst time, even worse than infancy, and we knew that if we didn't kill you a lot of people would die—and mostly they'd be the people you loved best. That's the way it is for most kids your age, they get angriest at the people they love most, only you couldn't help killing them, and what does that do to your mind? What kind of person do you become? There was some who said we didn't have the right to leave you alive even to study you, because it would be like having a cure for cancer and then not using it on people just to see how fast they'd die. Like that experiment where the government left syphilis cases untreated just to see what the final stages of the disease were like, even though they could have cured those people at any time. But some of us told them, Mick isn't a disease, and a bullet isn't penicillin. I told them, Mick is something special. And they said, yes, he's special, he kills more than any of those other kids, and we shot *them* or ran them over with a truck or drowned them, and here we've got the worst one of all and you want to keep him alive."

And I was crying cause I wished they *had* killed me, but also because it was the first time I ever thought there was people arguing that I ought to be alive, and even though I didn't rightly understand then or even now why you didn't kill me, I got to tell you that knowing somebody knew what I was and still chose not to blast my head off, that done me in, I just bawled like a baby.

One thing led to another, there, my crying and her holding me, and pretty soon I figured out that she pretty much wanted to get laid right there. But that just made me sick, when I knew that. "How can you want to do that!" I says to her. "I can't get married! I can't have no kids! They'd be like me!"

She didn't argue with me or say nothing about birth control, and so I figured out later that I was right, she wanted to have a baby, and that told me plain that she was crazy as a loon. I got my pants pulled back up and my shirt on, and I wouldn't look at her getting dressed again, neither.

"I could make you do it," she says to me. "I could do that to you. The ability you have that lets you kill also makes you sensitive. I can make you lose your mind with desire for me."

"Then why don't you?" I says.

"Why don't you kill if you can help it?" she says.

"Cause nobody has the right," says I.

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"That's right," she says.

"Anyway you're ten years older than me," I tell her.

"Fifteen," she says. "Almost twice your age. But that don't mean nothing." Or I guess she actually said, "That *doesn't* mean nothing," or probably, "that doesn't mean *anything*." She talks better than I do but I can't always remember the fancy way. "That doesn't mean a thing," she says. "You'll go to your folks, and you can bet they'll have some pretty little girl waiting for you, and she'll know how to do it much better than me, she'll turn you on so your pants unzip themselves, cause that's what they want most from you. They want your babies. As many as they can get, because you're the strongest they've produced in all the years since Grandpa Jake realized that the cursing power went father to son, mother to daughter, and that he could breed for it like you breed dogs or horses. They'll breed you like a stud, but then when they find out that you don't like killing people and you don't want to play along and you aren't going to take orders from whoever's in charge there now, they'll kill you. That's why I came to warn you. We could feel them just starting to call you. We knew it was time. And I came to warn you."

Most of this didn't mean much to me yet. Just the idea of having kinfolk was still so new I couldn't exactly get worried about whether they'd kill me or put me out for stud or whatever. Mostly what I thought about was her, anyway. "I might have killed you, you know."

"Maybe I didn't care," she says. "And maybe I'm not so easy to kill."

"And maybe you ought to tell me your name," says I.

"Can't," she says.

"How come?" says I.

"Because if you decide to put in with them, and you know my name, then I *am* dead."

"I wouldn't let anybody hurt you," says I.

She didn't answer that. She just says to me, "Mick, you don't know my name, but you remember this. I have hopes for you, cause I know you're a good man and you never meant to kill nobody. I could've made you love me, and I didn't, because I want you to do what you do by your own choice. And most important of all, if you come with me, we have a chance to see if maybe your ability doesn't have a good side."

You think I hadn't thought of that before? When I saw Rambo shooting down all those little brown guys, I thought, I could do that, and without no gun, either. And if somebody took me hostage like the Achille Lauro thing, we wouldn't have to worry about the terrorists going unpunished. They'd all be rotting in a hospital in no time. "Are you with the government?" I ask her.

"No," she says.

So they didn't want me to be a soldier. I was kind of disappointed. I

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kind of thought I might be useful that way. But I couldn't volunteer or nothing, cause you don't walk into the recruiting office and say, I've killed a couple dozen people by giving sparks off my body, and I could do it to Castro and Qaddafi if you like. Cause if they believe you, then you're a murderer, and if they don't believe you, they lock you up in a nuthouse.

"Nobody's been calling me, anyway," I says. "If I didn't see you today, I wouldn't've gone nowhere. I would've stayed with Mr. Kaiser."

"Then why did you take all your money out of the bank?" she says. "And when you ran away from me, why did you run toward the highway where you can hitch a ride at least to Madison and then catch another on in to Eden?"

And I didn't have no answer for her then, cause I didn't know rightly why I took my money out of the bank lessen it was like she said, and I was planning to leave town. It was just an impulse, to close that account, I didn't think nothing of it, just stuffed three hundreds into my wallet and come to think of it I really was heading toward Eden, I just didn't *think* of it, I was just *doing* it. Just the way I climbed up that hill.

"They're stronger than we are," she says. "So we can't hold you here. You have to go anyway, you have to work this thing out. The most we could do was just get you on the bus next to me, and then call you up this hill."

"Then why don't you come with me?" I says.

"They'd kill me in two seconds, right in front of your eyes, and none of this cursing stuff, either, Mick. They'd just take my head off with a machete."

"Do they know you?"

"They know *us*," she says. "We're the only ones that know your people exist, so we're the only ones working to stop them. I won't lie to you, Mick. If you join them, you can find us, you'll learn how, it isn't hard, and you can do this stuff from farther away, you could really take us apart. But if you join *us*, the tables are turned."

"Well maybe I don't want to be on either side in this war," I says. "And maybe now I won't go to Eden, neither. Maybe I'll go up to Washington D.C. and join the CIA."

"Maybe," she says.

"And don't try to stop me."

"I wouldn't try," she says.

"Damn straight," I says. And then I just walked on out, and this time I didn't walk in no circles, I just headed north, past her car, down the railroad right of way. And I caught a ride heading up toward D.C., and that was that.

Except that along about six o'clock in the evening I woke up and the

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car was stopping and I didn't know where I was, I must have slept all day, and the guy says to me, "Here you are, Eden, North Carolina."

And I about messed my pants. "Eden!" I says.

"It wasn't far out of my way," he says. "I'm heading for Burlington, and these country roads are nicer than the freeway, anyway. Don't mind if I never drive I-85 again, to tell the truth."

But that was the very guy who told me he had business in D.C., he was heading there from Bristol, had to see somebody from a government agency, and here he was in Eden. It made no sense at all, except for what that woman told me. Somebody was calling me, and if I wouldn't come, they'd just put me to sleep and call whoever was driving. And there I was. Eden, North Carolina. Scared to death, or at least scared a little, but also thinking, if what she said was true, my folks was coming, I was going to meet my folks.

Nothing much changed in the two years since I ran off from the orphanage. Nothing much ever changes in Eden, which isn't a real town anyway, just cobbled together from three little villages that combined to save money on city services. People still mostly think of them as three villages. There wasn't nobody who'd get too excited about seeing me, and there wasn't nobody I wanted to see. Nobody living, anyway. I had no idea how my folks might find me, or how I might find them, but in the meantime I went to see about the only people I ever much cared about. Hoping that they wouldn't rise up out of the grave to get even with me for killing them.

It was still full day that time of year, but it was whippy weather, the wind gusting and then holding still, a big row of thunderclouds off to the southwest, the sun sinking down to get behind them. The kind of afternoon that promises to cool you off, which suited me fine. I was still pretty dusty from my climb up the hill that morning, and I could use a little rain. Got a coke at a fast food place and then walked on over to see Old Peleg.

He was buried in a little cemetery right by an old Baptist Church. Not Southern Baptist, *Black* Baptist, meaning that it didn't have no fancy building with classrooms and a rectory, just a stark-white block of a building with a little steeple and a lawn that looked like it'd been clipped by hand. Cemetery was just as neat-kept. Nobody around, and it was dim cause of the thunderclouds moving through, but I wasn't afraid of the graves there, I just went to Old Peleg's cross. Never knew his last name was Lindley. Didn't sound like a black man's name, but then when I thought about it I realized that *no* last name sounded like a black man's name, because Eden is still just old-fashioned enough that an old black man doesn't get called by his last name much. He grew up in a Jim Crow state, and never got around to insisting on being called Mr. Lindley. Old

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Peleg. Not that he ever hugged me or took me on long walks or gave me that tender loving care that makes people get all teary-eyed about how wonderful it is to have parents. He never tried to be my dad or nothing. And if I hung around him much, he always gave me work to do and made damn sure I did it right, and mostly we didn't talk about anything except the work we was doing, which made me wonder, standing there, why I wanted to cry and why I hated myself worse for killing Old Peleg than for any of the other dead people under the ground in that city.

I didn't see them and I didn't hear them coming and I didn't smell my mama's perfume. But I knew they was coming, because I felt the prickly air between us. I didn't turn around, but I knew just where they were, and just how far off, because they was *lively*. Shedding sparks like I never saw on any living soul except myself, just walking along giving off light. It was like seeing myself from the outside for the first time in my life. Even when she was making me get all hot for her, that lady in Roanoke wasn't as lively as them. They was just like me.

Funny thing was, that wrecked everything. I didn't want them to be like me. I *hated* my sparkiness, and there they were, showing it to me, making me see how a killer looks from the outside. It took a few seconds to realize that they was *scared* of me, too. I recognized how scaredness looks, from remembering how my own bio-electrical system got shaped and changed by fear. Course I didn't think of it as a bio-electrical system then, or maybe I did cause she'd already told me, but you know what I mean. They was afraid of me. And I knew that was because I was giving off all the sparks I shed when I feel so mad at myself that I could bust. I was standing there at Old Peleg's grave, hating myself, so naturally they saw me like I was ready to kill half a city. They didn't know that it was me I was hating. Naturally they figured I might be mad at *them* for leaving me at that orphanage seventeen years ago. Serve them right, too, if I gave them a good hard twist in the gut, but I don't do that, I honestly don't, not any more, not standing there by Old Peleg who I loved a lot more than these two strangers, I don't act out being a murderer when my shadow's falling across his grave.

So I calmed myself down as best I could and I turned around and there they was, my mama and my daddy. And I got to tell you I almost laughed. All those years I watched them TV preachers, and we used to laugh till our guts ached about how Tammy Bakker always wore makeup so thick she could be a nigger underneath (it was okay to say that cause Old Peleg himself said it first) and here was my mama, wearing just as much makeup and her hair sprayed so thick she could work construction without a hardhat. And smiling that same sticky phony smile, and crying the same gooey oozey black tears down her cheeks, and reaching out her hands just the right way so I halfway expected her to say, "Praise to Lord

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Jesus," and then she actually *says* it, "Praise to Lord Jesus, it's my boy," and comes up and lays a kiss on my cheek with so much spit in it that it dripped down my face.

I wiped the slobber with my sleeve and felt my daddy have this little flash of anger, and I knew that he thought I was judging my mama and he didn't like it. Well, I was, I got to admit. Her perfume was enough to knock me over, I swear she must've mugged an Avon lady. And there was my daddy in a fine blue suit like a businessman, his hair all blow-dried, so it was plain he knew just as well as I did the way real people are supposed to look. Probably he was plain embarrassed to be seen in public with Mama, so why didn't he ever just say, Mama, you wear too much makeup? That's what I thought, and it wasn't till later that I realized that when your woman is apt to give you cancer if you rile her up, you don't go telling her that her face looks like she slept in wet sawdust and she smells like a whore. White trash, that's what my mama was, sure as if she was still wearing the factory label.

"Sure am glad to see you, son," says my daddy.

I didn't know what to say, tell the truth. I *wasn't* glad to see them, now that I saw them, because they wasn't exactly what a orphan boy dreams his folks is like. So I kind of grinned and looked back down at Old Peleg's grave.

"You don't seem too surprised to see *us*," he says.

I could've told him right then about the lady in Roanoke, but I didn't. Just didn't feel right to tell him. So I says, "I felt like somebody was calling me back here. And you two are the only people I met who's as sparky as me. If you all say you're my folks, then I figure it must be so."

Mama giggled and she says to him, "Listen, Jesse, he calls it 'sparky.' "

"The word we use is 'dusty,' son," says Daddy. "We say a body's looking dusty when he's one of us."

"You were a very dusty baby," says Mama. "That's why we knew we couldn't keep you. Never seen such a dusty baby before. Papa Lem made us take you to the orphanage before you even sucked one time. You never sucked even once." And her mascara just flooded down her face.

"Now Deeny," says Daddy, "no need telling him everything right here."

Dusty. That was no sense at all. It didn't look like *dust*, it was flecks of light, so bright on me that sometimes I had to squint just to see my own hands through the dazzle. "It don't *look* like dust," I says.

And Daddy says, "Well what do *you* think it looks like?"

And I says, "Sparks. That's why I call it being sparky."

"Well that's what it looks like to us, too," says Daddy. "But we've been calling it 'dusty' all our lives, and so I figure it's easier for one boy to change than for f—for lots of other folks."

Well, now, I learned a lot of things right then from what he said. First

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off, I knew he was lying when he said it looked like sparks to them. It didn't. It looked like what they called it. Dust. And that meant that I was seeing it a whole lot *brighter* than they could see it, and that was good for me to know, especially because it was plain that Daddy *didn't* want me to know it and so he pretended that he saw it the same way. He wanted me to think he was just as good at seeing as I was. Which meant that he sure wasn't. And I also learned that he didn't want me to know how many kinfolk I had, cause he started to say a number that started with F, and then caught himself and didn't say it. Fifty? Five hundred? The number wasn't half so important as the fact that he didn't want me to know it. They didn't trust me. Well, why should they? Like the lady said, I was better at this than they were, and they didn't know how mad I was about being abandoned, and the last thing they wanted to do was turn me loose killing folks. Especially themselves.

Well I stood there thinking about that stuff and pretty soon it makes them nervous and Mama says, "Now, Daddy, he can call it whatever he wants, don't go making him mad or something."

And Daddy laughs and says, "He isn't mad, are you, son?"

Can't they see for themselves? Course not. Looks like *dust* to them, so they can't see it clear at all.

"You don't seem too happy to see us," says Daddy.

"Now, Jesse," says Mama, "don't go pushing. Papa Lem said don't you push the boy, you just make his acquaintance, you let him know why we had to push him out of the nest so young, so now you explain it, Daddy, just like Papa Lem said to."

For the first time right then it occurred to me that my own folks didn't *want* to come fetch me. They came because this Papa Lem made them do it. And you can bet they hopped and said yes, knowing how Papa Lem used his—but I'll get to Papa Lem in good time, and you said I ought to take this all in order, which I'm mostly trying to do.

Anyway Daddy explained it just like the lady in Roanoke, except he didn't say a word about bio-electrical systems, he said that I was "plainly chosen" from the moment of my birth, that I was "one of the elect," which I remembered from Baptist Sunday School meant that I was one that God had saved, though I never heard of anybody who was saved the minute they was born and not even baptized or nothing. They saw how dusty I was and they knew I'd kill a lot of people before I got old enough to control it. I asked them if they did it a lot, putting a baby out to be raised by strangers.

"Oh, maybe a dozen times," says Daddy.

"And it always works out okay?" says I.

He got set to lie again, I could see it by ripples in the light, I didn't

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know lying could be so plain, which made me glad they saw dust instead of sparks. "Most times," he says.

"I'd like to meet one of them others," says I. "I figure we got a lot in common, growing up thinking our parents hated us, when the truth was they was scared of their own baby."

"Well they're mostly grown up and gone off," he says, but it's a lie, and most important of all was the fact that here I as much as said I thought they wasn't worth horse pucky as parents and the only thing Daddy can think of to say is why I can't see none of the other "orphans," which tells me that whatever he's lying to cover up must be real important.

But I didn't push him right then, I just looked back down at Old Peleg's grave and wondered if he ever told a lie in his life.

Daddy says, "I'm not surprised to find you here." I guess he was nervous, and had to change the subject. "He's one you dusted, isn't he?"

Dusted. That word made me so mad. What I done to Old Peleg wasn't *dusting*. And being mad must have changed me enough they could see the change. But they didn't know what it meant, cause Mama says to me, "Now, son, I don't mean to criticize, but it isn't right to take pride in the gifts of God. That's why we came to find you, because we need to teach you why God chose you to be one of the elect, and you shouldn't glory in yourself because you could strike down your enemies. Rather you should give all glory to the Lord, praise his name, because we are his servants."

I like to puked, I was so mad at that. Glory! Old Peleg, who was worth ten times these two phony white people who tossed me out before I ever sucked tit, and they thought I should give the *glory* for his terrible agony and death to *God*? I didn't know God all that well, mostly because I thought of him as looking as pinched up and serious as Mrs. Bethel who taught Sunday School when I was little, until she died of leukemia, and I just never had a thing to say to God. But if God gave me that power to strike down Old Peleg, and God wanted the glory for it when I was done, then I *did* have a few words to say to God. Only I didn't believe it for a minute. Old Peleg believed in God, and the God he believed in didn't go striking an old black man dead because a dumb kid got pissed off at him.

But I'm getting off track in the story, because that was when my father touched me for the first time. His hand was shaking. And it had every right to shake, because I was so mad that a year ago he would've been bleeding from the colon before he took his hand away. But I'd got so I could keep from killing whoever touched me when I was mad, and the funny thing was that his hand *shaking* kind of changed how I felt anyway. I'd been thinking about how mad I was that they left me and how mad

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I was that they thought I'd be proud of killing people but now I realized how brave they was to come fetch me, cause how did they know I wouldn't kill them? But they came anyway. And that's something. Even if Papa Lem told them to do it, they came, and now I realized that it was real brave for Mama to come kiss me on the cheek right then, because if I was going to kill her, she touched me and gave me a chance to do it before she even tried to explain anything. Maybe it was her strategy to win me over or something, but it was still brave. And she also didn't approve of people being proud of murder, which was more points in her favor. And she had the guts to tell me so right to my face. So I chalked up some points for Mama. She might look like as sickening as Tammy Bakker, but she faced her killer son with more guts than Daddy had.

He touched my shoulder and they led me to their car. A Lincoln Town Car, which they probably thought would impress me, but all I thought about was what it would've been like at the Children's Home if we'd had the price of that car, even fifteen years ago. Maybe a paved basketball court. Maybe some decent toys that wasn't broken-up hand-me-downs. Maybe some pants with knees in them. I never felt so poor in my life as when I slid onto that fuzzy seat and heard the stereo start playing elevator music in my ear.

There was somebody else in the car. Which made sense. If I'd killed them or something, they'd need somebody else to drive the car home, right? He wasn't much, when it came to being dusty or sparky or whatever. Just a little, and in rhythms of fear, too. And I could see *why* he was scared, cause he was holding a blindfold in his hands, and he says, "Mr. Yow, I'm afraid I got to put this on you."

Well, I didn't answer for a second, which made him more scared cause he thought I was mad, but mostly it took me that long to realize he meant *me* when he said "Mr. Yow."

"That's our name, son," says my daddy. "I'm Jesse Yow, and your mother is Minnie Rae Yow, and that makes you Mick Yow."

"Don't it figure," says I. I was joking, but they took it wrong, like as if I was making fun of their name. But I been Mick Winger so long that it just feels silly calling myself Yow, and the fact is it *is* a funny name. They said it like I should be proud of it, though, which makes me laugh, but to them it was the name of God's Chosen People, like the way the Jews called themselves Israelites in the Bible. I didn't know that then, but that's the way they said it, real proud. And they was ticked off when I made a joke, so I helped them feel better by letting Billy put on—Billy's the name of the man in the car—put on the blindfold.

It was a lot of country roads, and a lot of country talk. About kinfolk I never met, and how I'd love this person and that person, which sounded increasingly unlikely to me, if you know what I mean. A long-lost child

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is coming home and you put a *blindfold* on him. I knew we were going mostly east, cause of the times I could feel the sun coming in my window and on the back of my neck, but that was about it, and that wasn't much. They lied to me, they wouldn't show me nothing, they was scared of me. I mean, any way you look at it, they wasn't exactly killing the fatted calf for the prodigal son. I was definitely on probation. Or maybe even on trial. Which, I might point out, is exactly the way you been treating me, too, and I don't like it much better now than I did then, if you don't mind me putting some personal complaints into this. I mean, somewhere along the line somebody's going to have to decide whether to shoot me or let me go, because I can't control my temper forever locked up like a rat in a box, and the difference is a rat can't reach out of the box and blast you the way I can, so somewhere along the way somebody's going to have to figure out that you better either trust me or kill me. My personal preference is for trusting me, since I've given you more reason to trust me than you've given me to trust *you* so far.

But anyway I rode along in the car for more than an hour. We could have gotten to Winston or Greensboro or Danville by then, it was so long, and by the time we got there nobody was talking and from the snoring, Billy was even asleep. I wasn't asleep, though. I was watching. Cause I don't see sparks with my eyes, I see it with something else, like as if my sparks see other folks' sparks, if you catch my drift, and so that blindfold might've kept me from seeing the road, but it sure didn't keep me from seeing the other folks in the car with me. I knew right where they were, and right what they were feeling. Now, I've always had a knack for telling things about people, even when I couldn't see nary a spark or nothing, but this was the first time I ever saw anybody who was sparky besides me. So I sat there watching how Mama and Daddy acted with each other even when they wasn't touching or saying a thing, just little drifts of anger or fear or—well, I looked for love, but I didn't see it, and I know what it looks like, cause I've felt it. They were like two armies camped on opposite hills, waiting for the truce to end at dawn. Careful. Sending out little scouting parties.

Then the more I got used to understanding what my folks was thinking and feeling, toward each other, the easier it got for me to read what Billy had going on inside him. It's like after you learn to read big letters, you can read little letters, too, and I wondered if maybe I could even learn to understand people who didn't have hardly any sparks at all. I mean that occurred to me, anyway, and since then I've found out that it's mostly true. Now that I've had some practice I can read a sparky person from a long ways off, and even regular folks I can do a little reading, even through walls and windows. But I found that out later. Like when

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you guys have been watching me through mirrors. I can also see your microphone wires in the walls.

Anyway it was during that car ride that I first started seeing what I could see with my eyes closed, the shape of people's bio-electrical system, the color and spin of it, the speed and the flow and the rhythm and whatever, I mean those are the words I use, cause there isn't exactly a lot of books I can read on the subject. Maybe that Swedish doctor has fancy words for it. I can only tell you how it feels to me. And in that hour I got to be good enough at it that I could tell Billy was scared, all right, but he *wasn't* all that scared of me, he was mostly scared of Mama and Daddy. Me he was jealous of, angry kind of. Scared a little, too, but mostly mad. I thought maybe he was mad cause I was coming in out of nowhere already sparkier than him, but then it occurred to me that he probably couldn't even tell how sparky I was, because to him it'd look like dust, and he wouldn't have enough of a knack at it to see much distinction between one person and another. It's like the more light you give off, the clearer you can see other people's light. So I was the one with the blindfold on, but I could see clearer than anybody else in that car.

We drove on gravel for about ten minutes, and then on a bumpy dirt road, and then suddenly on asphalt again, smooth as you please, for about a hundred yards, and then we stopped. I didn't wait for a by-your-leave, I had that blindfold off in half a second.

It was like a whole town of houses, but right among the trees, not a gap in the leaves overhead. Maybe fifty, sixty houses, some of them pretty big, but the trees made them half invisible, it being summer. Children running all over, scruffy dirty kids from diapered-up snot-nose brats to most-growed kids not all that much younger than me. They sure kept us cleaner in the Children's Home. And they was all sparky. Mostly like Billy, just a little, but it explained why they wasn't much washed. There isn't many a mama who'd stuff her kid in a tub if the kid can make her sick just by getting mad.

It must've been near eight-thirty at night, and even the little kids still wasn't in bed. They must let their kids play till they get wore out and drop down and fall asleep by themselves. It came to me that maybe I wasn't so bad off growing up in an orphanage. At least I knew manners and didn't whip it out and pee right in front of company, the way one little boy did, just looking at me while I got out of the car, whizzing away like he wasn't doing nothing strange. Like a dog marking trees. He needed to so he done it. If I ever did that at the Children's Home they'd've slapped me silly.

I know how to act with strangers when I'm hitching a ride, but not when I'm being company, cause orphans don't go calling much so I never

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had much experience. So I'd've been shy no matter what, even if there wasn't no such thing as sparkiness. Daddy was all set to take me to meet Papa Lem right off, but Mama saw how I wasn't cleaned up and maybe she guessed I hadn't been to the toilet in a while and so she hustled me into a house where they had a good shower and when I came out she had a cold ham sandwich waiting for me on the table. On a plate, and the plate was setting on a linen place mat, and there was a tall glass of milk there, so cold it was sweating on the outside of the glass. I mean, if an orphan kid ever dreamed of what it might be like to have a Mama, that was the dream. Never mind that she didn't look like a model in the Sears Catalog. I felt clean, the sandwich tasted good, and when I was done eating she even offered me a cookie.

It felt good, I'll admit that, but at the same time I felt cheated. It was just too damn late. I needed it to be like this when I was seven, not seventeen.

But she was trying, and it wasn't all her fault, so I ate the cookie and drank off the last of the milk and my watch said it was after nine. Outside it was dusk now, and most of the kids were finally gone off to bed, and Daddy comes in and says, "Papa Lem says he isn't getting any younger."

He was outside, in a big rocking chair sitting on the grass. You wouldn't call him fat, but he did have a belly on him. And you wouldn't call him old, but he was bald on top and his hair was wispy yellow and white. And you wouldn't call him ugly, but he had a soft mouth and I didn't like the way it twisted up when he talked.

Oh, hell, he was fat, old, and ugly, and I hated him from the first time I saw him. A squishy kind of guy. Not even as sparky as my daddy, neither, so you didn't get to be in charge around here just by having more of whatever it was made us different. I wondered how close kin he was to me. If he's got children, and they look like him, they ought to drown them out of mercy.

"Mick Yow," he says to me, "Mick my dear boy, Mick my dear cousin."

"Good evening, sir," says I.

"Oh, and he's got manners," says he. "We were right to donate so much to the Children's Home. They took excellent care of you."

"You donated to the home?" says I. If they did, they sure didn't give *much*.

"A little," he says. "Enough to pay for your food, your room, your Christian education. But no luxuries. You couldn't grow up soft, Mick. You had to grow up lean and strong. And you had to know suffering, so you could be compassionate. The Lord God has given you a marvelous gift, a great helping of his grace, a heaping plateful of the power of God, and we had to make sure you were truly worthy to sit up to the table at the banquet of the Lord."

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I almost looked around to see if there was a camera, he sounded so much like the preachers on TV.

And he says, "Mick, you have already passed the first test. You have forgiven your parents for leaving you to think you were an orphan. You have kept that holy commandment, Honor thy father and mother, that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God hath given thee. You know that if you had raised a hand against them, the Lord would have struck you down. For verily I say unto you that there was two rifles pointed at you the whole time, and if your father and mother had walked away without you, you would have flopped down dead in that nigger cemetery, for God will not be mocked."

I couldn't tell if he was trying to provoke me or scare me or what, but either way, it was working.

"The Lord has chosen you for his servant, Mick, just like he's chosen all of us. The rest of the world doesn't understand this. But Grandpa Jake saw it. Long ago, back in 1820, he saw how everybody he hated had a way of dying without him lifting a finger. And for a time he thought that maybe he was like those old witches, who curse people and they wither up and die by the power of the devil. But he was a god-fearing man, and he had no truck with Satan. He was living in rough times, when a man was likely to kill in a quarrel, but Grandpa Jake never killed. Never even struck out with his fists. He was a peaceable man, and he kept his anger inside him, as the Lord commands in the New Testament. So surely he was not a servant of Satan!"

Papa Lem's voice rang through that little village, he was talking so loud, and I noticed there was a bunch of people all around. Not many kids now, all grownups, maybe there to hear Lem, but even more likely they was there to see me. Because it was like the lady in Roanoke said, there wasn't a one of them was half as sparky as me. I didn't know if they could all see that, but *I* could. Compared to normal folks they was all dusty enough, I suppose, but compared to me, or even to my mama and daddy, they was a pretty dim bunch.

"He studied the scriptures to find out what it meant that his enemies all suffered from tumors and bleeding and coughing and rot, and he came upon the verse of Genesis where the Lord said unto Abraham, 'I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee.' And he knew in his heart that the Lord had chosen him the way he chose Abraham. And when Isaac gave the blessing of God to Jacob, he said, 'Let people serve thee, and nations bow down to thee: cursed be every one that curseth thee, and blessed be he that blesseth thee.' The promises to the patriarchs were fulfilled again in Grandpa Jake, for whoever cursed him was cursed by God."

When he said those words from the Bible, Papa Lem sounded like the

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voice of God himself, I've got to tell you. I felt exalted, knowing that it was God who gave such power to my family. It was to the whole family, the way Papa Lem told it, because the Lord promised Abraham that his children would be as many as there was stars in the sky, which is a lot more than Abraham knew about seeing how he didn't have no telescope. And that promise now applied to Grandpa Jake, just like the one that said "in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed." So Grandpa Jake set to studying the book of Genesis so he could fulfil those promises just like the patriarchs did. He saw how they went to a lot of trouble to make sure they only married kinfolk—you know how Abraham married his brother's daughter, Sarah, and Isaac married his cousin Rebekah, and Jacob married his cousins Leah and Rachel. So Grandpa Jake left his first wife cause she was unworthy, meaning she probably wasn't particularly sparky, and he took up with his brother's daughter and when his brother threatened to kill him if he laid a hand on the girl, Grandpa Jake run off with her and his own brother died of a curse which is just exactly what happened to Sarah's father in the Bible. I mean Grandpa Jake worked it out just right. And he made sure all his sons married their first cousins, and so all of them had sparkiness twice over, just like breeding pointers with pointers and not mixing them with other breeds, so the strain stays pure.

There was all kinds of other stuff about Lot and his daughters, and if we remained faithful then we would be the meek who inherit the Earth because we were the chosen people and the Lord would strike down everybody who stood in our way, but what it all came down to at the moment was this: You marry whoever the patriarch tells you to marry, and Papa Lem was the patriarch. He had my mama marry my daddy even though they never particularly liked each other, growing up cousins, because he could see that they was both specially chosen, which means to say they was both about the sparkiest there was. And when I was born, they knew it was like a confirmation of Papa Lem's decision, because the Lord had blessed them with a kid who gave off dust thicker than a dump truck on a dirt road.

One thing he asked me real particular was whether I ever been laid. He says to me, "Have you spilled your seed among the daughters of Ishmael and Esau?"

I knew what spilling seed was, cause we got lectures about that at the Children's Home. I wasn't sure who the daughters of Ishmael and Esau was, but since I never had a hot date, I figured I was pretty safe saying no. Still, I did consider a second, because what came to mind was the lady in Roanoke, stoking me up just by wanting me, and I was thinking about how close I'd come to not being a virgin after all. I wondered if the lady from Roanoke was a daughter of Esau.

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Papa Lem picked up on my hesitation, and he wouldn't let it go. "Don't lie to me boy. I can see a lie." Well, since *I* could see a lie, I didn't doubt but what maybe he could too. But then again, I've had plenty of grownups tell me they could spot a lie—but half the time they accused me of lying when I was telling the truth, and the other half they believed me when I was telling whoppers so big it'd take two big men to carry them upstairs. So maybe he could and maybe he couldn't. I figured I'd tell him just as much truth as I wanted. "I was just embarrassed to tell you I never had a girl," I says.

"Ah, the deceptions of the world," he says. "They make promiscuity seem so normal that a boy is ashamed to admit that he is chaste." Then he got a glint in his eye. "I know the children of Esau have been watching you, wanting to steal your birthright. Isn't that so?"

"I don't know who Esau is," says I.

The folks who was gathered around us started muttering about that.

I says, "I mean, I know who he was in the Bible, he was the brother of Jacob, the one who sold him his birthright for split pea soup."

"Jacob was the rightful heir, the true eldest son," says Papa Lem, "and don't you forget it. Esau is the one who went away from his father, out into the wilderness, rejecting the things of God and embracing the lies and sins of the world. Esau is the one who married a strange woman, who was not of the people! Do you understand me?"

I understood pretty good by then. Somewhere along the line somebody got sick of living under the thumb of Papa Lem, or maybe the patriarch before him, and they split.

"Beware," says Papa Lem, "because the children of Esau and Ishmael still covet the blessings of Jacob. They want to corrupt the pure seed of Grandpa Jake. They have enough of the blessing of God to know that you're a remarkable boy, like Joseph who was sold into Egypt, and they will come to you with their whorish plans, the way Potiphar's wife came to Joseph, trying to persuade you to give them your pure and undefiled seed so that they can have the blessing that their fathers rejected."

I got to tell you that I didn't much like having him talk about my seed so much in front of mixed company, but that was nothing compared to what he did next. He waved his hand to a girl standing there in the crowd, and up she came. She wasn't half bad-looking, in a country sort of way. Her hair was mousy and she wasn't altogether clean and she stood with a two-bucket slouch, but her face wasn't bad and she looked to have her teeth. Sweet, but not my type, if you know what I mean.

Papa Lem introduced us. It was his daughter, which I might've guessed, and then he says to her, "Wilt thou go with this man?" And she looks at me and says, "I will go." And then she gave me this big smile, and all of a sudden it was happening again, just like it did with the lady in

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Roanoke, only twice as much, cause after all the lady in Roanoke wasn't hardly sparky. I was standing there and all I could think about was how I wanted all her clothes off her and to do with her right there in front of everybody and I didn't even care that all those people were watching, that's how strong it was.

And I liked it, I got to tell you. I mean you don't ignore a feeling like that. But another part of me was standing back and it says to me, "Mick Winger you damn fool, that girl's as homely as the bathroom sink, and all these people are watching her make an idiot out of you," and it was that part of me that got mad, because I didn't like her making me do something, and I didn't like it happening right out in front of everybody, and I specially didn't like Papa Lem sitting there looking at his own daughter and me like we was in a dirty magazine.

Thing is, when I get mad I get all sparky, and the madder I got, the more I could see how she was doing it, like she was a magnet, drawing me to her. And as soon as I thought of it like us being magnets, I took all the sparkiness from being mad and I used it. Not to hurt her or nothing, because I didn't put it on her the way I did with the people I killed. I just kind of turned the path of her sparks plain upside down. She was spinning it just as fast as ever, but it went the other way, and the second that started, why, it was like she disappeared. I mean, I could see her all right, but I couldn't hardly *notice* her. I couldn't focus my eyes on her.

Papa Lem jumped right to his feet, and the other folks were gasping. Pretty quick that girl stopped sparking at me, you can bet, and there she was on her knees, throwing up. She must've had a real weak digestion, or else what I done was stronger than I thought. She was really pouring on the juice, I guess, and when I flung it back at her and turned her upside down, well, she couldn't hardly walk when they got her up. She was pretty hysterical, too, crying about how awful and ugly I was, which might've hurt my feelings except that I was scared to death.

Papa Lem was looking like the wrath of God. "You have rejected the holy sacrament of marriage! You have spurned the handmaid God prepared for you!"

Now you've got to know that I hadn't put everything together yet, or I wouldn't have been so afraid of him, but for all I knew right then he could kill me with a cancer. And it was a sure thing he could've had those people beat me to death or whatever he wanted, so maybe I was right to be scared. Anyway I had to think of a way to make him not be mad at me, and what I came up with must not've been too bad because it worked, didn't it?

I says to him, as calm as I can, "Papa Lem, she was not an acceptable handmaiden." I didn't watch all those TV preachers for nothing. I knew

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how to talk like the Bible. I says, "She was not blessed enough to be my wife. She wasn't even as blessed as my mama. You can't tell me that she's the best the Lord prepared for me."

And sure enough, he calmed right down. "I know that," he says. And he isn't talking like a preacher any more, it's *me* talking like a preacher and him talking all meek. "You think I don't know it? It's those children of Esau, that's what it is, Mick, you got to know that. We had five girls who were a lot dustier than her, but we had to put them out into other families, cause they were like you, so strong they would've killed their own parents without meaning to."

And I says, "Well, you brought me back, didn't you?"

And he says, "Well you were *alive*, Mick, and you got to admit that makes it easier."

"You mean those girls're all dead?" I says.

"The children of Esau," he says. "Shot three of them, strangled one, and we never found the body of the other. They never lived to be ten years old."

And I thought about how the lady in Roanoke told me she had me in her gunsights a few times. But she let me live. Why? For my seed? Those girls would've had seed too, or whatever. But they killed those girls and let me live. I didn't know why. Hell, I still don't, not if you mean to keep me locked up like this for the rest of my life. I mean you might as well have blasted my head off when I was six, and then I can name you a dozen good folks who'd still be alive, so no thanks for the favor if you don't plan to let me go.

Anyway, I says to him, "I didn't know that. I'm sorry."

And he says to me, "Mick, I can see how you'd be disappointed, seeing how you're so blessed by the Lord. But I promise you that my daughter is indeed the best girl of marriageable age that we've got here. I wasn't trying to foist her off on you because she's my daughter—it would be blasphemous for me to try it, and I'm a true servant of the Lord. The people here can testify for me, they can tell you that I'd never give you my own daughter unless she was the best we've got."

If she was the best they got then I had to figure the laws against inbreeding made pretty good sense. But I says to him, "Then maybe we ought to wait and see if there's somebody younger, too young to marry right now." I remembered the story of Jacob from Sunday School, and since they set such store by Jacob I figured it'd work. I says, "Remember that Jacob served seven years before he got to marry Rachel. I'm willing to wait."

That impressed hell out of him, you can bet. He says, "You truly have the prophetic spirit, Mick. I have no doubt that someday you'll be Papa in my place, when the Lord has gathered me unto my fathers. But I hope

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you'll also remember that Jacob married Rachel, but he first married the older daughter, Leah."

The ugly one, I thought, but I didn't say it. I just smiled and told him how I'd remember that, and there was plenty of time to talk about it tomorrow, because it was dark now and I was tired and a lot of things had happened to me today that I had to think over. I was really getting into the spirit of this Bible thing, and so I says to him, "Remember that before Jacob could dream of the ladder into heaven, he had to sleep."

Everybody laughed, but Papa Lem wasn't satisfied yet. He was willing to let the marriage thing wait for a few days. But there was one thing that couldn't wait. He looks me in the eye and he says, "Mick, you got a choice to make. The Lord says those who aren't for me are against me. Joshua said choose ye this day whom ye will serve. And Moses said, 'I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live.' "

Well I don't think you can put it much plainer than that. I could choose to live there among the chosen people, surrounded by dirty kids and a slimy old man telling me who to marry and whether I could raise my own children, or I could choose to leave and get my brains blasted out or maybe just pick up a stiff dose of cancer—I wasn't altogether sure whether they'd do it quick or slow. I kind of figured they'd do it quick, though, so I'd have no chance to spill my seed among the daughters of Esau.

So I gave him my most solemn and hypocritical promise that I would serve the Lord and live among them all the days of my life. Like I told you, I didn't know whether he could tell if I was lying or not. But he nodded and smiled so it looked like he believed me. Trouble was, I knew *he* was lying, and so that meant he *didn't* believe me, and that meant I was in deep poo, as Mr. Kaiser's boy Greggy always said. In fact, he was pretty angry and pretty scared, too, even though he tried to hide it by smiling and keeping a lid on himself. But I knew that he knew that I had no intention of staying there with those crazy people who knocked up their cousins and stayed about as ignorant as I ever saw. Which meant that he was already planning to kill me, and sooner rather than later.

No, I better tell the truth here, cause I wasn't *that* smart. It wasn't till I was halfway to the house that I really wondered if he believed me, and it wasn't till Mama had me with a nice clean pair of pajamas up in a nice clean room, and she was about to take my jeans and shirt and underwear and make *them* nice and clean that it occurred to me that maybe I was going to wish I had more clothes on than pajamas that night. I really got kind of mad before she finally gave me back my clothes—she was scared that if she didn't do what I said, I'd do something

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to her. And then I got to thinking that maybe I'd made things even *worse* by not giving her the clothes, because that might make them think that I was planning to skip out, and so maybe they weren't planning to kill me before but now they would, and so I probably just made things worse. Except when it came down to it, I'd rather be wrong about the one thing and at least have my clothes, than be wrong about the other thing and have to gallivant all over the country in pajamas. You don't get much mileage on country roads barefoot in pajamas, even in the summer.

As soon as Mama left and went on downstairs, I got dressed again, including my shoes, and climbed in under the covers. I'd slept out in the open, so I didn't mind sleeping in my clothes. What drove me crazy was getting my shoes on the sheets. They would've yelled at me so bad at the Children's Home.

I laid there in the dark, trying to think what I was going to do. I pretty much knew how to get from this house out to the road, but what good would that do me? I didn't know where I was or where the road led or how far to go, and you don't cut cross country in North Carolina—if you don't trip over something in the dark, you'll bump into some moonshine or marijuana operation and they'll blast your head off, not to mention the danger of getting your throat bit out by some tobacco farmer's mean old dog. So there I'd be running along a road that leads nowhere with them on my tail and if they wanted to run me down, I don't think fear of cancer would slow down your average four-wheeler.

I thought about maybe stealing a car, but I don't have the first idea how to hotwire anything. It wasn't one of the skills you pick up at the Children's Home. I knew the idea of it, somewhat, because I'd done some reading on electricity with the books Mr. Kaiser lent me so I could maybe try getting ready for the GED, but there wasn't a chapter in there on how to get a Lincoln running without a key. Didn't know how to drive, either. All the stuff you pick up from your dad or from your friends at school, I just never picked up at all.

Maybe I dozed off, maybe I didn't. But I suddenly noticed that I could see in the dark. Not *see*, of course. Feel the people moving around. Not far off at first, except like a blur, but I could feel the near ones, the other ones in the house. It was cause they was sparky, of course, but as I laid there feeling them drifting here and there, in the rhythms of sleep and dreams, or walking around, I began to realize that I'd been feeling people all along, only I didn't know it. They wasn't sparky, but I always knew where they were, like shadows drifting in the back of your mind, I didn't even know that I knew it, but they were there. It's like when Diz Riddle got him his glasses when he was ten years old and all of a sudden he just went around whooping and yelling about all the stuff he saw. He always used to see it before, but he didn't rightly know what half the stuff was.

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Like pictures on coins. He knew the coins was bumpy, but he didn't know they was pictures and writing and stuff. That's how this was.

I laid there and I could make a map in my brain where I could see a whole bunch of different people, and the more I tried, the better I could see. Pretty soon it wasn't just in that house. I could feel them in other houses, dimmer and fainter. But in my mind I didn't see no walls so I didn't know whether somebody was in the kitchen or in the bathroom, I had to think it out, and it was hard, it took all my concentration. The only guide I had was that I could see electric wires when the current was flowing through them, so wherever a light was on or a clock was running or something, I could feel this thin line, really thin, not like the shadows of people. It wasn't much, but it gave me some idea of where some of the walls might be.

If I could've just told who was who I might have made some guesses about what they was doing. Who was asleep and who was awake. But I couldn't even tell who was a kid and who was a grown-up, cause I couldn't see sizes, just brightness. Brightness was the only way I knew who was close and who was far.

I was pure lucky I got so much sleep during the day when that guy was giving me a ride from Roanoke to Eden. Well, that wasn't lucky, I guess, since I wished I hadn't gone to Eden at all, but at least having that long nap meant that I had a better shot at staying awake until things quieted down.

There was a clump of them in the next house. It was hard to sort them out, cause three of them was a lot brighter, so I thought they was closer, and it took a while to realize that it was probably Mama and Daddy and Papa Lem along with some others. Anyway it was a meeting, and it broke up after a while, and all except Papa Lem came over. I didn't know what the meeting was about, but I knew they was scared and mad. Mostly scared. Well, so was I. But I calmed myself down, the way I'd been practicing, so I didn't accidently kill nobody. That kind of practice made it so I could keep myself from getting too lively and sparky, so they'd think I was asleep. They didn't see as clear as I did, too, so that'd help. I thought maybe they'd all come up and get me, but no, they just all waited downstairs while one of them came up, and he didn't come in and get me, neither. All he did was go to the other rooms and wake up whoever was sleeping there and get them downstairs and out of the house.

Well, that scared me worse than ever. That made it plain what they had in mind, all right. Didn't want me giving off sparks and killing somebody close by when they attacked me. Still, when I thought about it, I realized that it was also a good sign. They was scared of me, and rightly so. I could reach farther and strike harder than any of them. And

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they saw I could throw off what got tossed at me, when I flung back what Papa Lem's daughter tried to do to me. They didn't know how much I could do.

Neither did I.

Finally all the people was out of the house except the ones downstairs. There was others outside the house, maybe watching, maybe not, but I figured I better not try to climb out the window.

Then somebody started walking up the stairs again, alone. There wasn't nobody else to fetch down, so they could only be coming after me. It was just one person, but that didn't do me no good—even one grown man who knows how to use a knife is better off than me. I still don't have my full growth on me, or at least I sure hope I don't, and the only fights I ever got in were slugging matches in the yard. For a minute I wished I'd took kung fu lessons instead of sitting around reading math and science books to make up for dropping out of school so young. A lot of good math and science was going to do me if I was dead.

The worst thing was I couldn't see him. Maybe they just moved all the children out of the house so they wouldn't make noise in the morning and wake me. Maybe they was just being nice. And this guy coming up the stairs might just be checking on me or bringing me clean clothes or something—I couldn't tell. So how could I twist him up, when I didn't know if they was trying to kill me or what? But if he *was* trying to kill me, I'd wish I'd twisted him before he ever came into the room with me.

Well, that was one decision that got made for me. I laid there wondering what to do for so long that he got to the top of the stairs and came to my room and turned the knob and came in.

I tried to breathe slow and regular, like somebody asleep. Tried to keep from getting too sparky. If it was somebody checking on me, they'd go away.

He didn't go away. And he walked soft, too, so as not to wake me up. He was real scared. So scared that I finally knew there was no way he was there to tuck me in and kiss me good night.

So I tried to twist him, to send sparks at him. But I didn't have any sparks to send! I mean I wasn't mad or anything. I'd never tried to kill somebody on purpose before, it was always because I was already mad and I just lost control and it *happened*. Now I'd been calming myself down so much that I couldn't lose control. I had no sparks at all to send, just my normal shining shadow, and he was right there and I didn't have a second to lose so I rolled over. Toward him, which was maybe dumb, cause I might have run into his knife, but I didn't know yet for sure that he had a knife. All I was thinking was that I had to knock him down or push him or something.

The only person I knocked down was me. I bumped him and hit the

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floor. He also cut my back with the knife. Not much of a cut, he mostly just snagged my shirt, but if I was scared before, I was terrified now cause I knew he had a knife and I knew even more that I didn't. I scrambled back away from him. There was almost no light from the window, it was like being in a big closet, I couldn't see him, he couldn't see me. Except of course that I *could* see him, or at least sense where he was, and now I was giving off sparks like crazy so unless he was weaker than I thought, he could see me too.

Well, he was weaker than I thought. He just kind of drifted, and I could hear him swishing the knife through the air in front of him. He had no idea where I was.

And all the time I was trying to get madder and madder, and it wasn't working. You can't get mad by trying. Maybe an actor can, but I'm no actor. So I was scared and sparking but I couldn't get that pulse to mess him up. The more I thought about it, the calmer I got.

It's like you've been carrying around a machine gun all your life, accidently blasting people you didn't really want to hurt and then the first time you really want to lay into somebody, it jams.

So I stopped trying to get mad. I just sat there realizing I was going to die, that after I finally got myself under control so I didn't kill people all the time anymore, now that I didn't really want to commit suicide, *now* I was going to get wasted. And they didn't even have the guts to come at me openly. Sneaking in the dark to cut my throat while I was asleep. And in the meeting where they decided to do it, my long lost but loving mama and daddy were right there. Heck, my dear sweet daddy was downstairs right now, waiting for this assassin to come down and tell him that I was dead. Would he cry for me then? Boo hoo my sweet little boy's all gone? Mick is in the cold cold ground?

I was mad. As simple as that. Stop thinking about being mad, and start thinking about the things that if you think about them, they'll make you mad. I was so sparky with fear that when I got mad, too, it was worse than it ever was before, built up worse, you know. Only when I let it fly, it didn't go for the guy up there swishing his knife back and forth in the dark. That pulse of fire in me went right down through the floor and straight to dear old Dad. I could hear him scream. He felt it, just like that. He felt it. And so did I. Because that wasn't what I meant to do. I only met him that day, but he was my *father*, and I did him worse than I ever did anybody before in my life. I didn't plan to do it. You don't plan to kill your father.

All of a sudden I was blinded by light. For a second I thought it was the other kind of light, sparks, them retaliating, twisting me. Then I realized it was my eyes being blinded, and it was the overhead light in the room that was on. The guy with the knife had finally realized that

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the only reason not to have the light on was so I wouldn't wake up, but now that I was awake he might as well see what he's doing. Lucky for me the light blinded him just as much as it blinded me, or I'd have been poked before I saw what hit me. Instead I had time to scramble on back to the far corner of the room.

I wasn't no hero. But I was seriously thinking about running at him, attacking a guy with a knife. I would have been killed, but I couldn't think of anything else to do.

Then I thought of something else to do. I got the idea from the way I could feel the electric current in the wires running from the lightswitch through the wall. That was electricity, and the lady in Roanoke called my sparkiness bio-electricity. I ought to be able to do something with it, shouldn't I?

I thought first that maybe I could short-circuit something, but I didn't think I had that much electricity in me. I thought of maybe tapping into the house current to add to my own juice, but then I remembered that connecting up your body to house current is the same thing other folks call *electrocution*. I mean, maybe I can tap into house wiring, but if I was wrong, I'd be real dead.

But I could still do something. There was a table lamp right next to me. I pulled off the shade and threw it at the guy, who was still standing by the door, thinking about what the scream downstairs meant. Then I grabbed the lamp and turned it on, and then smashed the lightbulb on the nightstand. Sparks. Then it was out.

I held the lamp in my hand, like a weapon, so he'd think I was going to beat off his knife with the lamp. And if my plan was a bust, I guess that's what I would've done. But while he was looking at me, getting ready to fight me knife against lamp, I kind of let the jagged end of the lamp rest on the bedspread. And then I used my sparkiness, the anger that was still in me. I couldn't fling it at the guy, or well I could have, but it would've been like the bus driver, a six-month case of lung cancer. By the time he died of *that*, I'd be six months worth of dead from multiple stab wounds to the neck and chest.

So I let my sparkiness build up and flow out along my arm, out along the lamp, like I was making my shadow grow. And it worked. The sparks just went right on down the lamp to the tip, and built up and built up, and all the time I was thinking about how Papa Lem was trying to kill me cause I thought his daughter was ugly and how he made me kill my daddy before I even knew him half a day and that charge built *up*.

It built up enough. Sparks started jumping across inside the broken light bulb, right there against the bedspread. Real sparks, the kind I could *see*, not just feel. And in two seconds that bedspread was on fire. *Then* I yanked the lamp so the cord shot right out of the wall, and I

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threw it at the guy, and while he was dodging I scooped up the bedspread and ran at him. I wasn't sure whether I'd catch on fire or he would, but I figured he'd be too panicked and surprised to think of stabbing me *through* the bedspread, and sure enough he didn't, he dropped the knife and tried to beat off the bespread. Which he didn't do too good, because I was still pushing it at him. Then he tried to get through the door, but I kicked his ankle with my shoe, and he fell down, still fighting off the blanket.

I got the knife and sliced right across the back of his thigh with it. Geez it was sharp. Or maybe I was so mad and scared that I cut him stronger than I ever thought I could, but it went clear to the bone. He was screaming from the fire and his leg was gushing blood and the fire was catching on the wallpaper and it occurred to me that they couldn't chase me too good if they was trying to put out a real dandy house fire.

It also occurred to me that I couldn't run away too good if I was dead inside that house fire. And thinking of maybe dying in the fire made me realize that the guy was burning to death and I did it to him, something every bit as terrible as cancer, and *I didn't care*, because I'd killed so many people that it was nothing to me now, when a guy like that was trying to kill me, I wasn't even sorry for his pain, cause he wasn't feeling nothing worse than Old Peleg felt, and in fact that even made me feel pretty good, because it was like getting even for Old Peleg's death, even though it was me killed them both. I mean how could I get *even* for Peleg dying by killing somebody else? Okay, maybe it makes sense in a way, cause it was their fault I was in the orphanage instead of growing up here. Or maybe it made sense because this guy deserved to die, and Peleg didn't, so maybe somebody who deserved it had to die a death as bad as Peleg's, or something. I don't know. I sure as hell wasn't thinking about that then. I just knew that I was hearing a guy scream himself to death and I didn't even want to help him or even *try* to help him or nothing. I wasn't enjoying it, either, I wasn't thinking, Burn you sucker! or anything like that, but I knew right then that I wasn't even human, I was just a monster, like I always thought, like in the slasher movies. This was straight from the slasher movies, somebody burning up and screaming, and there's the monster just standing there in the flames and he *isn't burning*.

And that's the truth. I wasn't burning. There was flames all around me, but it kind of shied back from me, because I was so full of sparks from hating myself so bad that it was like the flames couldn't get through to me. I've thought about that a lot since then. I mean, even that Swedish scientist doesn't know all about this bio-electrical stuff. Maybe when I get real sparky it makes it so other stuff can't hit me. Maybe that's how some generals in the Civil War used to ride around in the open—or

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maybe that was that general in World War II, I can't remember—and bullets didn't hit them or anything. Maybe if you're charged up enough, things just can't *get* to you. I don't know. I just know that by the time I finally decided to open the door and actually opened it, the whole room was burning and the door was burning and I just opened it and walked through. Course now I got a bandage on my hand to prove that I couldn't grab a hot doorknob without hurting myself a little, but I shouldn't've been able to stay alive in that room and I came out without even my hair singed.

I started down the hall, not knowing who was still in the house. I wasn't used to being able to see people by their sparkiness yet, so I didn't even think of checking, I just ran down the stairs carrying that bloody knife. But it didn't matter. They all ran away before I got there, all except Daddy. He was lying in the middle of the floor in the living room, doubled up, lying with his head in a pool of vomit and his butt in a pool of blood, shaking like he was dying of cold. I really done him. I really tore him up inside. I don't think he even saw me. But he was my daddy, and even a monster don't leave his daddy for the fire to get him. So I grabbed his arms to try to pull him out.

I forgot how sparky I was, worse than ever. The second I touched him the sparkiness just rushed out of me and all over him. It never went that way before, just completely surrounded him like he was a part of me, like he was completely drowning in my light. It wasn't what I meant to do at all. I just forgot. I was trying to save him and instead I gave him a hit like I never gave nobody before, and I couldn't stand it, I just screamed.

Then I dragged him out. He was all limp, but even if I killed him, even if I turned him to jelly inside, he wasn't going to burn, that's all I could think of, that and how I ought to walk back into that house myself and up the stairs and catch myself on fire and die.

But I didn't do it, as you might guess. There was people yelling Fire! and shouting Stay back! and I knew that I better get out of there. Daddy's body was lying on the grass in front of the house, and I took off around the back. I thought maybe I heard some gunshots, but it could've been popping and cracking of timbers in the fire, I don't know. I just ran around the house and along toward the road, and if there was people in my way they just got *out* of my way, because even the most dimwitted inbred pukebrained kid in that whole village would've seen my sparks, I was so hot.

I ran till the asphalt ended and I was running on the dirt road. There was clouds so the moon was hardly any light at all, and I kept stumbling off the road into the weeds. I fell once and when I was getting up I could see the fire behind me. The whole house was burning, and there was

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flames above it in the trees. Come to think of it there hadn't been all that much rain, and those trees were dry. A lot more than one house was going to burn tonight, I figured, and for a second I even thought maybe nobody'd chase me.

But that was about as stupid an idea as I ever had. I mean, if they wanted to kill me before because I said Papa Lem's girl was ugly, how do you think they felt about me now that I burned down their little hidden town? Once they realized I was gone, they'd be after me and I'd be lucky if they shot me quick.

I even thought about cutting off the road, dangerous or not, and hiding in the woods. But I decided to get as much distance as I could along the road till I saw headlights.

Just when I decided that, the road ended. Just bushes and trees. I went back, tried to find the road. It must have turned but I didn't know which way. I was tripping along like a blind man in the grass, trying to feel my way to the ruts of the dirt road, and of course that's when I saw headlights away off toward the burning houses—there was at least three houses burning now. They knew the town was a total loss by now, they was probably just leaving enough folks to get all the children out and away to a safe place, while the men came after me. It's what *I* would've done, and to hell with cancer, they knew I couldn't stop them all before they did what they wanted to me. And here I couldn't even find the road to get away from them. By the time their headlights got close enough to show the road, it'd be too late to get away.

I was about to run back into the woods when all of a sudden a pair of headlights went on not twenty feet away, and pointed right at me. I damn near wet my pants. I thought, Mick Winger, you are a dead little boy right this second.

And then I heard her calling to me. "Get on over here, Mick, you idiot, don't stand there in the light, get on over here." It was the lady from Roanoke. I still couldn't see her cause of the lights, but I knew her voice, and I took off. The road didn't end, it just turned a little and she was parked right where the dirt road met up sideways with a gravel road. I got around to the door of the car she was driving, or truck or whatever it was—a four-wheel-drive Blazer maybe, I know it had a four-wheel-drive shift lever in it—anyway the door was locked and she was yelling at me to get *in* and I was yelling back that it was *locked* until finally she unlocked it and I climbed in. She backed up so fast and swung around onto the gravel in a spin that near threw me right out the door, since I hadn't closed it yet. Then she took off so fast going *forward*, spitting gravel behind her, that the door closed itself.

"Fasten your seat belt," she says to me.

"Did you follow me here?" I says.

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"No, I just happened to be here picnicking," she says. "Fasten your damn *seat belt*."

I did, but then I turned around in my seat and looked out the back. There was five or six sets of headlights, making the jog to get from the dirt road onto the gravel road. We didn't have more than a mile on them.

"We've been looking for this place for years," she says. "We thought it was in Rockingham County, that's how far off we were."

"Where is it, then?" I says.

"Alamance County," she says.

And then I says, "I don't give a damn what county it is! I killed my own daddy back there!"

And she says to me, "Don't get mad now, don't get mad at me, I'm sorry, just calm down." That was all she could think of, how I might get mad and lose control and kill her, and I don't blame her, cause it was the hardest thing I ever did, keeping myself from busting out right there in the car, and it would've killed her, too. The pain in my hand was starting to get to me, too, from where I grabbed the doorknob. It was just building up and building up.

She was driving a lot faster than the headlights reached. We'd be going way too fast for a curve before she even saw it, and then she'd slam on the brakes and we'd skid and sometimes I couldn't believe we didn't just roll over and crash. But she always got out of it.

I couldn't face back anymore. I just sat there with my eyes closed, trying to get calm, and then I'd remember my daddy who I didn't even *like* but he was my daddy lying there in his blood and his puke, and I'd remember that guy who burned to death up in my room and even though I didn't care at the time, I sure cared now, I was so angry and scared and I hated myself so bad I couldn't hold it in, only I also couldn't let it out, and I kept wishing I could just die. Then I realized that the guys following us were close enough that I could feel them. Or no it wasn't that they was close. They was just so *mad* that I could see their sparks flying like never before. Well as long as I could see them I could let fly, couldn't I? I just flung out toward them. I don't know if I hit them. I don't know if my bio-electricity is something I can throw like that or what. But at least I shucked it off myself, and I didn't mess up the lady who was driving.

When we hit asphalt again, I found out that I didn't know what crazy driving was before. She peeled out and now she began to look at a curve ahead and then switch off the headlights until she was halfway through the curve, it was the craziest thing I ever saw, but it also made sense. They had to be following our lights, and when our lights went out they wouldn't know where we was for a minute. They also wouldn't know that the road curved ahead, and they might even crash up or at least they'd

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have to slow down. Of course, we had a real good chance of ending up eating trees ourselves, but she drove like she knew what she was doing.

We came to a straight section with a crossroads about a mile up. She switched off the lights again, and I thought maybe she was going to turn, but she didn't. Just went on and on and on, straight into the pitch black. Now, that straight section was long, but it didn't go on forever, and I don't care how good a driver you are, you can't keep track of how far you've gone in the dark. Just when I thought for sure we'd smash into something, she let off the gas and reached her hand out the window with a flashlight. We was still going pretty fast, but the flashlight was enough to make a reflector up ahead flash back at us, so she knew where the curve was, and it was farther off than I thought. She whipped us around that curve and then around another, using just a couple of blinks from the flashlight, before she switched on her headlights again.

I looked behind us to see if I could see anybody. "You lost them!" I says.

"Maybe," she says. "You tell *me*."

So I tried to feel where they might be, and sure enough, they was sparky enough that I could just barely tell where they was, away back. Split up, smeared out. "They're going every which way," I says.

"So we lost a few of them," she says. "They aren't going to give up, you know."

"I know," I says.

"You're the hottest thing going," she says.

"And you're a daughter of Esau," I says.

"Like hell I am," she says. "I'm a great-great-great-granddaughter of Jacob Yow, who happened to be bio-electrically talented. Like if you're tall and athletic, you can play basketball. That's all it is, just a natural talent. Only he went crazy and started inbreeding his whole family, and they've got these stupid ideas about being the chosen of God and all the time they're just *murderers*."

"Tell me about it," I says.

"You can't help it," she says. "You didn't have anybody to teach you. I'm not blaming you."

But I was blaming me.

She says, "Ignorant, that's what they are. Well, my grandpa didn't want to just keep reading the Bible and killing any revenuers or sheriffs or whatever who gave us trouble. He wanted to find out what we *are*. He also didn't want to marry the slut they picked out for him because he wasn't particularly dusty. So he left. They hunted him down and tried to kill him, but he got away, and he married. And he also studied and became a doctor and his kids grew up knowing that they had to find out what it *is*, this power. It's like the old stories of witches, women who get

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mad and suddenly your cows start dying. Maybe they didn't even know they were doing it. Summonings and love spells and come-hithers, everybody can do it a little, just like everybody can throw a ball and sometimes make a basket, but some people can do it better than others. And Papa Lem's people, they do it best of all, better and better, because they're breeding for it. We've got to stop them, don't you see? We've got to keep them from learning how to control it. Because now we know more about it. It's all tied up with the way the human body heals itself. In Sweden they've been changing the currents around to heal tumors. Cancer. The opposite of what you've been doing, but it's the same principle. Do you know what that means? If they could control it, Lem's people could be healers, not killers. Maybe all it takes is to do it with love, not anger."

"Did you kill them little girls in orphanages with love?" I says.

And she just drives, she doesn't say a thing, just drives. "Damn," she says, "it's raining."

The road was slick in two seconds. She slowed way down. It came down harder and harder. I looked behind us and there was headlights back there again. Way back, but I could still see them. "They're on us again," I says.

"I can't go any faster in the rain," she says.

"It's raining on them too," I says.

"Not with my luck."

And I says, "It'll put the fire out. Back where they live."

And she says, "It doesn't matter. They'll move. They know we found them, because we picked you up. So they'll move."

I apologized for causing trouble, and she says, "We couldn't let you die in there. I had to go there and save you if I could."

"Why?" I ask her. "Why not let me die?"

"Let me put it another way," she says. "If you decided to stay with them, I had to go in there and kill you."

And I says to her, "You're the queen of compassion, you know?" And I thought about it a little. "You're just like they are, you know?" I says. "You wanted to get pregnant just like they did. You wanted to breed me like a stud horse."

"If I wanted to *breed* you," she says, "I would have done it on the hill this morning. Yesterday morning. You would've done it. And I should've made you, because if you went with them, our only hope was to have a child of yours that we could raise to be a decent person. Only it turned out you're a decent person, so we didn't have to kill you. Now we can study you and learn about this from the strongest living example of the phenomenon"—I don't know how to pronounce that, but you know what I mean. Or what she meant, anyway.

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And I says to her, "Maybe I don't want you to study me, did you think of that?"

And she says to me, "Maybe what you want don't amount to a goldfish fart." Or anyway that's what she meant.

That's about when they started shooting at us. Rain or no rain, they was pushing it so they got close enough to shoot, and they wasn't half bad at it, seeing as the first bullet we knew about went right through the back window and in between us and smacked a hole in the windshield. Which made all kinds of cracks in the glass so she couldn't see, which made her slow down more, which meant they was even closer.

Just then we whipped around a corner and our headlights lit up a bunch of guys getting out of a car with guns in their hands, and she says, "Finally." So I figured they was some of her people, there to take the heat off. But at that same second Lem's people must have shot out a tire or maybe she just got a little careless for a second cause after all she couldn't see too good through the windshield, but anyway she lost control and we skidded and flipped over, rolled over it felt like five times, all in slow motion, rolling and rolling, the doors popping open and breaking off, the windshield cracking and crumbling away, and there we hung in our seatbelts, not talking or nothing, except maybe I was saying O my God or something and then we smacked into something and just stopped, which jerked us around inside the car and then it was all over.

I heard water rushing. A stream, I thought. We can wash up. Only it wasn't a stream, it was the gasoline pouring out of the tank. And then I heard gunshots from back up by the road. I didn't know who was fighting who, but if the wrong guys won they'd just love to catch us in a nice hot gasoline fire. Getting out wasn't going to be all that hard. The doors were gone so we didn't have to climb out a window or anything.

We were leaned over on the left side, so her door was mashed against the ground. I says to her, "We got to climb out my door." I had brains enough to hook one arm up over the lip of the car before I unbuckled my seat belt, and then I hoisted myself out and stayed perched up there on the side of the car, up in the air, so I could reach down and help her out.

Only she wasn't climbing out. I yelled at her and she didn't answer. I thought for a second she was dead, but then I saw that her sparks was still there. Funny, how I never saw she had any sparkiness before, because I didn't know to look for it, but now, even though it was dim, I could see it. Only it wasn't so dim, it was real busy, like she was trying to heal herself. The gurgling was still going on, and everything smelled like gasoline. There was still shooting going on. And even if nobody came down to start us on fire on purpose, I saw enough car crashes at the movies to know you didn't need a match to start a car on fire. I sure didn't want to be near the car if it caught, and I sure didn't want her *in*

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it. But I couldn't see how to climb down in and pull her out. I mean I'm not a weakling but I'm not Mr. Universe either.

It felt like I sat there for a whole minute before I realized I didn't have to pull her out my side of the car, I could pull her out the *front* cause the whole windshield was missing and the roof was only mashed down a little, cause there was a rollbar in the car—that was real smart, putting a rollbar in. I jumped off the car. It wasn't raining right here, but it *had* rained, so it was slippery and wet. Or maybe it was slippery from the gasoline, I don't know. I got around the front of the car and up to the windshield, and I scraped the bits of glass off with my shoe. Then I crawled partway in and reached under her and undid her seatbelt, and tried to pull her out, but her legs was hung up under the steering wheel and it took forever, it was terrible, and all the time I kept listening for her to breathe, and she didn't breathe, and so I kept getting more scared and frustrated and all I was thinking about was how she had to live, she couldn't be dead, she just got through saving my life and now she was dead and she couldn't be and I was going to get her out of the car even if I had to break her legs to do it, only I didn't have to break her legs and she finally slid out and I dragged her away from the car. It didn't catch on fire, but I couldn't know it wasn't going to.

And anyway all I cared about then was her, not breathing, lying there limp on the grass with her neck all floppy and I was holding on to her crying and angry and scared and I had us both covered with sparks, like we was the same person, just completely covered, and I was crying and saying, Live! I couldn't even call her by name or nothing because I didn't know her name. I just know that I was shaking like I had the chills and so was she and she was breathing now and whimpering like somebody just stepped on a puppy and the sparks just kept flowing around us both and I felt like somebody sucked everything out of me, like I was a wet towel and somebody wrung me out and flipped me into a corner, and then I don't remember until I woke up here.

What did it feel like? What you did to her?

It felt like when I covered her with light, it was like I was taking over doing what her own body should've done, it was like I was healing her. Maybe I got that idea because she said something about healing when she was driving the car, but she wasn't breathing when I dragged her out, and then she was breathing. So I want to know if I healed her. Because if she got healed when I covered her with my own light, then maybe I didn't kill my daddy either, because it was kind of like that, I *think* it was kind of like that, what happened when I dragged him out of the house.

I been talking a long time now, and you still told me nothing. Even

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if you think I'm just a killer and you want me dead, you can tell me about her. Is she alive?

Yes.

Well then how come I can't see her? How come she isn't here with the rest of you?

She had some surgery. It takes time to heal.

But did I help her? Or did I twist her? You got to tell me. Cause if I didn't help her then I hope I fail your test and you kill me cause I can't think of a good reason why I should be alive if all I can do is kill people.

You helped her, Mick. That last bullet caught her in the head. That's why she crashed.

But she wasn't bleeding!

It was dark, Mick. You couldn't see. You had her blood all over you. But it doesn't matter now. We have the bullet out. As far as we can tell, there was no brain damage. There should have been. She should have been dead.

So I did help her.

Yes. But we don't know how. All kinds of stories, you know, about faith healing, that sort of thing. Laying on of hands. Maybe it's the kind of thing you did, merging the bio-magnetic field. A lot of things don't make any sense yet. There's no way we can see that the tiny amount of electricity in a human bio-electric system could influence somebody a hundred miles off, but they summoned you, and you came. We need to study you, Mick. We've never had anybody as powerful as you. Tell the truth, maybe there's never been anybody like you. Or maybe all the healings in the New Testament—

I don't want to hear about no testaments. Papa Lem gave me about all the testaments I ever need to hear about.

Will you help us, Mick?

Help you how?

Let us study you.

Go ahead and study.

Maybe it won't be enough just to study how you *heal* people.

I'm not going to kill nobody for you. If you try to make me kill somebody I'll kill you first till you have to kill me just to save your own lives, do you understand me?

Calm down, Mick. Don't get angry. There's plenty of time to think about things. Actually we're glad that you don't want to kill anybody. If you enjoyed it, or even if you hadn't been able to control it and kept on indiscriminately killing anyone who enraged you, you wouldn't have lived to be seventeen. Because yes, we're scientists, or at least we're finally learning enough that we can start

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being scientists. But first we're human beings, and we're in the middle of a war, and children like you are the weapons. If they ever got someone like you to stay with them, work with them, you could seek us out and destroy us. That's what they wanted you to do.

That's right, that's one thing Papa Lem said, I don't know if I mentioned it before, but he said that the children of Israel were supposed to kill every man, woman, and child in Canaan, cause idolaters had to make way for the children of God.

Well, you see, that's why our branch of the family left. We didn't think it was such a terrific idea, wiping out the entire human race and replacing it with a bunch of murderous, incestuous religious fanatics. For the last twenty years, we've been able to keep them from getting somebody like you, because we've murdered the children that were so powerful they had to put them outside to be reared by others.

Except me.

It's a war. We didn't like killing children. But it's like bombing the place where your enemies are building a secret weapon. The lives of a few children—no, that's a lie. It nearly split us apart ourselves, the arguments over that. Letting you live—it was a terrible risk. I voted against it every time. And I don't apologize for that, Mick. Now that you know what they are, and you chose to leave, I'm glad I lost. But so many things could have gone wrong.

They won't put any more babies out to orphanages now, though. They're not that dumb.

But now we have *you*. Maybe we can learn how to block what they do. Or how to heal the people they attack. Or how to identify sparkiness, as you call it, from a distance. All kinds of possibilities. But sometime in the future, Mick, you may be the only weapon we have. Do you understand that?

I don't want to.

I know.

You wanted to kill me?

I wanted to protect people from you. It was safest. Mick, I really am glad it worked out this way.

I don't know whether to believe you, Mr. Kaiser. You're such a good liar. I thought you were so nice to me all that time because you were just a nice guy.

Oh, he is, Mick. He's a nice guy. Also a damn fine liar. We kind of needed both those attributes in the person we had looking out for you.

Well, anyway, that's over with.

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What's over with?

Killing me. Isn't it?

That's up to you, Mick. If you ever start getting crazy on us, or killing people that aren't part of this war of ours—

I won't do that!

But if you did, Mick. It's never too late to kill you.

Can I see her?

See who?

The lady from Roanoke! Isn't it about time you told me her name?

Come on. She can tell you herself. ●

NEXT ISSUE:

Lucius Shepard returns to *IAsfm* next issue with our April cover story, "The Sun Spider." A passionate tale of love, intrigue, and transcendence, set in a very exotic locale—Helios Station, a research facility in orbit around the south pole of the Sun—"The Sun Spider" is something of a departure for Shepard, and promises to be one of 1987's major stories, just as Shepard's 1986 novella "R & R" was perhaps the most talked-about story we published last year. "The Sun Spider" is Shepard at his exciting and evocative best, breaking new literary ground, and is sure to be one of the events of the year; don't miss it. **Pat Murphy** is also on hand in April, with one of the strongest and most eloquent stories we've seen in some time, the haunting "Rachel in Love," a tale that forces us to take a new look at just what it means to be human. And **Harry Turtledove** returns with another story in his popular Basil Argyros series, set in an alternate world where the Byzantine Empire continues to hold sway; in this one, "Superwine," the wonders of Strong Drink are introduced to a world used only to wine—with some strange, far-reaching, and deceitedly ominous results.

Also in April: **George M. Ewing** takes us "A Little Further Up the Fox" in his *IAsfm* debut, on a droll and *very* high-tech fishing trip; from small-stream fishing in the future, **Lillian Stewart Carl** then takes us to present-day Scotland on a quest for a big fish of a very different sort, the illusive Loch Ness monster itself, in the bittersweet "Out of Darkness"; and the irrepresible **Rudy Rucker** returns with our April Viewpoint column, a fascinating look—complete with computer-generated illustrations—into the strange new world of "Cellular Automata." Plus our usual array of columns and features. Look for the April issue on your newsstands on March 10, 1987.

COMING UP: stories by **Bruce Sterling, Nancy Kress, Frederik Pohl, Robert Silverberg, Charles Sheffield, James Tiptree, Jr., Pat Cadigan, Lucius Shepard, Jane Yolen, Orson Scott Card, Neal Barrett, Jr., David Smeds, Gwyneth Jones, George Alec Effinger, Kim Stanley Robinson,** and many others. So subscribe today!

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GAMING

(continued from page 20)

Silverberg's Majipoor.

A die is rolled and one player, the "dasher," reads one of five words. (A roll of six makes it his/her choice.) Then all the players write down their definition of the word and hand it to the dasher, who has, in the meantime, written down the real definition.

All the definitions are read aloud, and the players individually vote for which one they think is the real definition. (You can try to bluff other players and vote for your own definition, a trick I used with some success.)

When the laughter subsides (I mean, really, *you will laugh*), the dasher states which is the real definition. One point is awarded for every vote a player's phony definition receives. Two points are awarded to each player who chooses the true *Balderdash* meaning. The dasher gets three points if no one picks the correct meaning, and three points are awarded to the player who submits a definition which is similar or very close to the correct meaning.

For every point awarded a player moves one space on the board, closer to the finish line. And the next person then becomes the dasher.

But who cares about that? In this game, the play is everything, and winning is merely a signal to start all over again.

Some of the games proved to be absolutely inspiring to the players in their task of definition fabrication. "Jerque," for example, was described by my fellow players as a small village in Northern Quebec, dried beef, the gummy residue left in fondue pots, and to search for things that have been smuggled.

Then there's "matuolypea" which is: (a) a disease of the lymph nodes which arrests maturation, (b) the extreme overuse of the pupil of the eye causing blindness, (c) the feigned aversion to small animals, or (d) getting out of bed on the wrong side.

Of course, some of the definitions are absurd, and have a sort of delayed time-bomb hilarity about them. (Take another look at letter (c) in the previous example.)

The game comes with only one optional rule, that is having the dasher make up a phony definition also, to make it just a bit more difficult. The dasher also has to keep a straight face, which in some cases is an almost impossible task.

So, while the worlds of science fiction and fantasy may include a variety of unusual, invented words, *Balderdash* is an interesting experience with words that may be even stranger than fictional ones.

And for once we get truth in advertising. *Balderdash* is genuinely hilarious. ●

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Unbelievable Ghost

Ghost
By Piers Anthony
Tor, $14.95

In Piers Anthony's *Ghost*, it is a not-so-distant future, and the world's cultures have been tailored to meet the crises brought on primarily by the almost total exhaustion of the fuel supply. Obliquely peculiar measures have been taken to limit the population, for instance; miscegenation is enforced. No one can marry a member of his/her own race, ostensibly to curb racial prejudice.

Anything to do with waste is obscene. Overweight people are vilified. "Waster" is an ultimate insult. The ongoing space program is regarded by the general public as a monstrous waste of the little remaining energy sources, and everyone who has to do with it is regarded as villainous, though it is kept going by the authorities as the only hope for humanity.

Spaceman Shetland discovers this antagonism when, on leave to Earth, he eschews the warning briefing and gets into all sorts of trouble immediately. He is rescued from a mob by an oriental psychic who lives in a windmill.

While playing chess with the psychic in the windmill, Shetland receives a call rescinding his leave. He is promoted and put in charge of an experimental ship which travels in time *and* space, the *Meg II*. Another ship, the *Meg I*, has disappeared without a trace several quadrillions of years in the future. Since the ships' place in space is constant, while the universe moves on, a shipboard beacon is vital. It is a sort of psionic device dependent on the crew's mental health which fails if anyone gets too agitated. Shetland drafts the oriental psychic to tend the beacon; the balance of the small crew, whose equanimity is all-important, is subjected to several last minute changes of personnel.

Far into the future, the beacon shows signs of trouble. The expedition's "physo-chemist" takes the wrong capsule and dies. Shetland hides her body in a food freezer so that the rest of the crew won't be upset. Nevertheless, her fiancé, the cartographer, goes into hysterics because this many quadrillion years in the future, they are entering the time when the galaxies are dead and only their ghosts remain—"the malignant spirits of once-living nebulae."

Shetland temporarily stuns the

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cartographer with a gas gun, and then does the same to the pilot, who is also showing signs of instability. Then he and the psychic find themselves confronting the ghost of a galaxy. All during these events, there have been endless conversations about ghosts, the seven deadly sins, and the end of the universe, among other things. The book continues on into further mushy metaphysics, in which various crew members become ghosts and are subject to all sorts of illusions involving chess pieces, primitive man, and skyscrapers.

There is a final "Author's Note" chronicling the many times the various versions of *Ghost* had been rejected by various editors. It is about the only part of the book that I understood.

Place-Taking

A Hidden Place
By Robert Charles Wilson
Bantam, $3.50 (paper)

Poor Robert Charles Wilson is laboring under a real burden. His first novel, *A Hidden Place*, is already being compared to the work of Theodore Sturgeon. This, at first, might seem felicitous rather than unfortunate; there are certainly a lot worse people one can be compared to (naming no names, of course). Sturgeon was a unique talent in fantasy and SF. And unlike so many statements in jacket blurbs and quotes, this one is certainly valid; very early on while reading *A Hidden Place*, one is struck by the resemblance.

But this kind of comparison raises expectations, which are unfair to a young novelist; to be pegged "the new Sturgeon" is indeed a burden. And there is also the implication of imitation, unvoiced or not. This is also potentially misleading. As noted above, Sturgeon's style was unique to the genre, but it certainly has its roots elsewhere. The sort of folksy, American quality, with an emphasis on characters usually eccentric but seldom unredeemably unpleasant, and an evocation of a (possibly mythical) United States heartland as a setting is certainly reminiscent in its turn of Thornton Wilder and other literary figures of earlier in the century.

Whatever, this humanistic strain has been rare in SF lately. *A Hidden Place* is set in a small town in the Midwest during the Depression years of the thirties. The protagonists are two young misfits: a youth living with an aunt and uncle who is outcast because his mother (now dead) had been reduced to whoring, and a girl who is just too intelligent for a Bible Belt small town (she reads Jung).

The two, Travis and Nancy, are drawn together soon after the boy arrives in town, and they are both intrigued by Anna, a mysterious young woman who rooms with Travis' aunt and uncle, and with whom the uncle seems to be having a sexual relationship. She appears to exert a strange power of compelling protectiveness over certain people.

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Travis and his uncle eventually fight over Anna, and Travis flees with her to an abandoned shack outside of town. Here she inadvertantly reveals a terrifying alien quality which appalls Travis, and he abandons her to Nancy's care.

This story is interspersed with chapters dealing with a freakish hobo named Bone, and his life riding the rails and living in the violent hobo jungles of the Depression. He is unnaturally, memorably thin,, and has no memory beyond that of being a hobo; however, there is always the sense of something calling him, something to which the mazes of the railroad system will eventually take him unplanned.

Needless to say, Bone and Anna are connected, are in fact two parts of one alien creature stranded on this world. Unfortunately, while this is the key to the story, it is a comparatively small part of the novel.

Bone and Anna's strangeness is submerged in Travis and Nancy's problems with life in a small town and the details of life in the hobo jungles. Wilson writes about these things very well indeed, with color and a special feel (though too prone to sudden sentences like "Deep currents stirred in the prairie grass" after an emotional moment with the characters).

But if he can stir this talent into SF concepts that are stronger and a little original . . . well, we won't have a second Sturgeon, we'll have a first Robert Charles Wilson.

Miss Neandertal

Singletusk

By Bjorn Kurten

Pantheon, $14.95

A few years back Bjorn Kurten wrote a textbook example of science fiction. In it, he took scientific fact established by research, added probable but highly imaginative speculation and wove a story about the meeting of two different intelligent species whose plot and characters stemmed directly from these factors. It was called *Dance of the Tiger* and is relatively unknown to the SF readership because it was of that dubious subgenre, the prehistoric novel, and more or less overshadowed by more highly touted mixtures of ice and soap, such as *Clan of the Cave Bear*.

Kurten has just written another novel, *Singletusk*, which is just as good as the first. It is not exactly a sequel, since it takes place a generation after *Dance of the Tiger*, and the events of that book have almost become legend.

And knowledge of the first story isn't necessary for enjoyment of the new one (though it should be noted that *Dance of the Tiger* is still available in paperback).

The setting is Northern Europe during a warmer climatic stage of the Ice Age, the Denekamp interstadial, about thirty thousand years ago. It is in this period that humans and Neandertals are supposed to have co-existed in Europe for a relatively short time (a thousand years). *Singletusk* is about the

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uneasy relationship between the two species.

It is uneasy, but hardly warlike. One of the refreshing aspects of this view of primitive man is that he/she was *not* red in tooth and claw, and his/her life was *not* necessarily brief, brutish, and bestial. Humans *and* Neandertals are basically peaceable, though as varied from individual to individual as any modern population, and they are intelligently adapted to their lives and equally intelligently adapting to new circumstances. Particularly appealing are Kurten's Neandertals, a very formal people who address each other with the honorifics of Mister and Miss, have a vivid tradition of story-telling, and are matriarchal and white-skinned, as opposed to the very dark humans who have come up from the South.

The two races have intermingled with some degree of understanding, and have even interbred, though it is beginning to dawn on each race that the resultant offspring are sterile and that the Neandertals are in danger of disappearing. This prompts one of the half-breed young women, Miss Avens, who has been raised among the Neandertals, to gather what is essentially a rebel guerilla group to keep the humans from the Neandertal homeland, and eliminate those that are there.

This is one of the novel's major themes. Another is the travels of the young human male, Whitespear (a descriptive name for the mammoth). There is an enormous amount of coming and going among both races. The country has its dangers, many of which we meet (forest fires, rock falls, some predators, temperamental mammoths, and rogue humans), but it is still safe enough to encourage much traveling, particularly in search of an individual with unique skills, such as healing.

All in all, it is a unique and refreshing look at primitive humanity, and a fascinating study of what is possibly the only real occurrence of mankind meeting another intelligent species.

Mirror, Mirror, Off The Wall

The Mirror of Her Dreams

By Stephen R. Donaldson
Del Rey, $19.95

The heroine's a wimp, and the hero's a klutz, in *The Mirror of Her Dreams*, the latest novel by Stephen R. Donaldson, author of the popular "Thomas Covenant" trilogies. That's okay. How many fantasies (as well as other kinds of story) have as leading characters men or women with notable social deficiencies—this trait inevitably appeals to the imperfect in all of us, and we tend to rejoice when the nerds and twits come out on top. But . . .

Terisa Morgan lives in a luxurious condominium with lots of mirrors in New York. This is because she needs mirrors to convince her that she exists, because she's had a really rotten upbringing, which you hear a lot about.

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One evening, when she is at home fighting non-existence, a young man by the name of Geraden falls through one of her mirrors and after a brief but appealing explanation, takes her back through the looking glass to his country of Mordant.

Mordant is one of those medieval-type kingdoms; it is ruled by a king, once heroic, who is now behaving so senescently that the place is on the verge of collapse or invasion or both. Geraden is the youngest son of a Lord of Mordant and an apprentice Imager. Imagery is the only magic of the kingdom; it consists of making mirrors which reflect other places and things, and then transferring the things to Mordant. Geraden had gone into a mirror after a champion and unexpectedly, had ended up in New York and come back with Terisa. This is totally unprecedented.

Terisa is immediately tossed into Mordant's complicated and circuitous intrigues. Everyone tries to use her since no one can believe that she's not important. She continues to spend a lot of time trying to convince herself she exists; a major philosophical question in Mordant is whether the things transferred from the mirrors have had any prior existence and this doesn't help her state of mind at all. Neither does the black figure that keeps jumping out of the woodwork and trying to kill her. The accident-prone Geraden falls downstairs and bumps his head a lot. Then there's the horde of killer cockroaches let loose from one of the mirrors.

This is one of those novels where no one ever bothers to try and work out anything with anyone else (though all the characters talk endlessly), and after five hundred pages of misunderstood motives you want to shake the entire cast of thousands. The rules and details of Imagery, on which everything that happens is based, are not very clear. Mordant itself has two neighboring kingdoms which are part of the intrigue, but aside from a vague mention of other countries with which one of those trades, Mordant's world seems to have no geography whatsoever. The surrealistically whacko world that Alice found on the other side of a mirror was a good deal more convincing.

And on top of everything else, this is only half the story. There's another installment to come, and this one ends with a cliffhanger. One reader, at least, will let it hang.

Saracens Vs. Aztecs

The Crystal Empire
By L. Neil Smith
Bluejay, $17.95

Forget Europe. Almost all of the population got knocked off by the Plague in the fourteenth century, even though a bright priest put two and two (two rats and two fleas) together and came up with the cause. So what do we have in the twenty-first century? Three great ecumenes now dominate the world: the Moslem and Jewish religions

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have combined and rule Europe, Africa, and the Near East, with settlements in Australia, from Islam's Eternal City, Rome; the "Mughuls," descended from Afghan conquerors, have filled the power void left by the Mongols and dominate the Far East; and there are rumors of a mysterious, "hidden" Empire on the west coast of the New World.

The east coast, on the other hand, has nothing but scattered colonies of the remnants of the European population, with a distinctly Scandinavian flavor, reduced to stagnant near-barbarism and kept so by remnants of Christian and pagan belief whose main no-nos are rats and gunpowder. These colonists have an uneasy truce with the resident red men, and no contact with Islam to the East or the mystery culture to the west.

It's a fun alternate history that L. Neil Smith has set up in *The Crystal Empire*; it's too bad that the details, not to mention plot and characters, aren't equally amusing. The major part of the book is concerned with an expedition mounted by the Saracen ruler of Rome to the New World to marry off his favorite daughter, Ayesha, to the ruler of the mystery Empire (on the chance that that ruler is the right age, sex, and/or religion to want a wife); this is done in hopes that the marriage will create an alliance against the Mughuls, who are encroaching on Australia.

So off we go across America in a "landship" picking up various assorted characters including the famous Fireclaw, driven from the Eastern settlements for experimenting with gunpowder among other things, who has settled among the plains redskins and managed to discover everything from electricity to repeating rifles. After a spirited battle with neo-Commanches in the Rockies, the party is captured by a great flying machine. It is from the hidden Empire of Han-Meshika, a combined Aztec-Chinese culture centered in California (wouldn't you know?).

It's all Edgar Rice Burroughs territory. Long-lost sons and old enemies pop up out of nowhere. The "landship" sailor acquired at the last minute turns out to be the boy-Emperor of the Han-Meshikans in disguise. The super-scientific Empire has floating airships, submersible vessels, and oodles of human sacrifices accomplished by some sort of rays focused from the sun. At the climax, the Princess is saved from becoming fricassee on top of the great crystal pyramid by lots of sword play and derring-do and a captured airship, and the whole place is done in by an earthquake and a tidal wave, not to mention some refocused rays. (Haven't seen anything like that since Atlantis bought it.)

This was all lots of fun when Burroughs did it way back when, but it seems pretty dated today. Piling on lots of sex and violence (rapes, dismemberments, cannibalism) gives only a superficially modern veneer. And while one hates

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to pick nits, Smith's geography does pose some problems. He seems to have forgotten the Appalachians entirely, he seems to think that Rome lies "in the shadow of Vesuvius," and his very Scandinavian settlers speak "Helvetian," which is an antique term applying to Switzerland.

Sophisticated Kitty

Grimbold's Other World
By Nicholas Stuart Gray
Ace, $2.95 (paper)

Let's make no bones about it. Nicholas Stuart Gray's *Grimbold's Other World* is a juvenile. It has a protagonist who is a youngster, there's no sex and little violence, and the fairy-tale world in which it takes place is relatively simple, rather whimsical and peopled mostly by people who are likable, if somewhat daft at times. Grimbold is a large cat, and he has a talent for taking the young goatherd Muffler into another night world, more or less an extension of his own, where magical adventures keep happening. There are lost Princes, baby dragons gone astray, very eccentric witches, and a rather nasty sorcerer named Sable that Muffler keeps running afoul of.

Nevertheless, it's one of those transcendent juveniles that, in the skill of the writing, the wit of the circumstances, and the skewed humor of the events, not to mention the charm of the characters, is infinitely more sophisticated than many of the so-called "adult" fantasies now being written, which seem to be by people who have confined their input to other "adult" fantasies and spent their lives in some remote community cut off from the modern world.

Shoptalk

A sequel to A. Orr's highly amusing fantasy fable, *The World In Amber*, has been published. Needless to say, it has nothing to do with that other Amber place. These two are set in "a small derelict world" which has been caught in a drop of resin while it was still viscous. The new one is called *In the Ice King's Palace* "The World In Amber, Book 2" (Bluejay, $15.95) . . . Most anthologies these days, whatever their excuse (i.e. theme), tend to be alike, a mixed bag of stories good, bad, and indifferent. A new one that is at least unusual in theme is *Worlds Apart*, edited by Camilla Decarnin, Eric Garber, and Lyn Paleo (Alyson, $7.95, paper). It's "an anthology of lesbian and gay science fiction and fantasy" and a followup to the similarly themed *Kindred Spirits* of some years ago. This one has stories by such notables as Joanna Russ, Samuel R. Delany, Edgar Pangborn, James Tiptree, Jr., Marion Zimmer Bradley, and Elizabeth A. Lynn.

Yet another sequel to mention is Harry Harrison's followup to his highly popular *West of Eden*. Again it's intelligent dinosaurs vs. primitive humanity in *Winter In Eden* (Bantam, $18.95). As you might guess from the title, a new Ice Age is adding to everybody's problems.

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One might note that intelligent dinosaurs seem to suddenly be a popular theme, perhaps started by Harrison with the first book . . . Speaking of Harrison, another installment in this column's ongoing campaign to keep the weary reader abreast of what's happening with the myriad series of past and present. The first three books of Harrison's Stainless Steel Rat series have long been available in one volume, *The Adventures of the Stainless Steel Rat.* Now suddenly the first one, called logically enough *The Stainless Steel Rat,* is re-issued as a single volume (Ace, $2.95, paper). A *caveat* to potential buyers who may already have the omnibus volume.

A delightful picture book has appeared, *Futuredays* by name. It reproduces in color a set of drawings made late in the nineteenth century by a French artist, Jean Marc Coté, depicting what life would be like in the year 2000. These were to be sold as sets of cards at the turn of the century to celebrate the year 1900. It never happened, but a proof set survived, and now makes up this enchanting book. The drawings "predict" everything from a mechanized farm to a future kitchen that looks for all the world like a chemistry lab. The appreciative text is by Isaac Asimov.

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Robot Dreams* by Isaac Asimov (Berkley, $7.95, paper); *Magical Wishes (Isaac Asimov's Magical Worlds of Fantasy #7)* edited by Isaac Asimov, Martin H. Greenberg, and Charles G. Waugh (NAL, $3.50, paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles , % The Science Fiction Shop, 56 8th Ave., New York, N.Y. 10014. ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

I'm just back from the WorldCon as I write, with news of future WorldCons. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, & a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (long) envelope) at 4271 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 823–3117. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Early evening's a good time to phone cons (most are home numbers) (be polite). For free listings, tell me about your con 6 months ahead. Look for me at cons behind the "Filthy Pierre" badge.

JANUARY, 1987

30–Feb. 2—**SerCon.** For info, write: **Box 1169, Berkeley CA 94701.** Or call: **(612) 379–8924** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Oakland CA (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: Samuel R. Delany, Malcolm Edwards, Ian Watson, editor Donald A. Wollheim, artist Vincent di Fate. "Serious and constructive" about SF (no masquerade, video, gaming, awards).

30–Feb. 2—**ChimeraCon.** *UNC Student Union, Chapel Hill NC. Wold, Card, Drake, Kessel, Van Name.*

FEBRUARY, 1987

6–8—**ConQuistador. (619) 461–1917.** Bahia Hotel, San Diego, CA. R. A. MacAvoy. Masquerade.

13–15—**ConCeption.** *Leeds, UK. Commemoration and partial re-creation of the 1st scheduled SF con.*

13–15—**Boskone.** Sheraton Boston Hotel, Boston MA. 3,800 here in 1986. No masquerade or big films.

13–15—**EclectiCon.** Sacramento Inn, Sacramento CA. Goldin, Garb, Laing. Dead GoH: E. A. Poe.

20–22—**SFeraCon, Ivanicgradska 41A, Zagreb 41000, Yugoslavia. (41) 21–71–22.** Guests. Low-key.

20–22—**WisCon, c/o SF3, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701.** Connie Willis, Avedon Carol. Feminism & SF.

20–22—**ConTemplation, c/o Summers, MA406, Medicine, UMC, 1 Hospital Dr., Columbia MO 65202. (314) 882–2237 (days).** Guests, dealers, video, gaming, pool of eels, strange rites. At UMC Union.

21–22—**CapriconWest, 425 W. Alondra Blvd., Gardena CA 90248. (213) 516–0668 or (714) 491–9809.**

MARCH, 1987

6–8—**ConCave, Box 24, Franklin KY 42134.** Park City (Park Mammoth Resort) KY. Jane & Scott Dennis.

AUGUST, 1987

27–Sep. 2—**ConSpiracy, 23 Kensington Ct., Hempstead NY 11550.** Brighton, UK. WorldCon 1987.

SEPTEMBER, 1987

5–8—**CactusCon, Box 27201, Tempe AZ 85282.** Phoenix AZ. The NASFiC, held since WorldCon is abroad.

SEPTEMBER, 1988

1–5—**NoLaCon II, Box 8010, New Orleans LA 70182. (504) 821–2362, 861–2602, 393–8363, 282–0443.** Donald A. Wollheim, Roger Sims, Mike Resnick. The World SF Convention for 1988. Join now for $50.

AUGUST, 1989

31–Sep. 4—***Noreascon 3, Box 46, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.*** *Boston MA. The World SF Convention for 1989.* Professional Guest of Honor to be announced. Join by 2/15/87 (postmark?) at $40, then $50.

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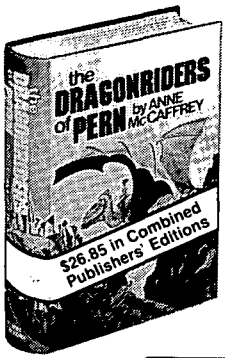

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